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Annals of a Fishing Village



By A Son of the Marshes

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ANNALS OF A FISHING VILLAGE

"The low, bare flats at ebb-tide, the rush of the sea at flood,
Through inlet and creek and river, from dike to upland wood;
The gulls in the red of morning, the fish-hawks rise and fall,
The drift of the fog in moonshine, over the dark coast wall."

J. G. WHITTIER.

ANNALS

OF

A FISHING VILLAGE

BY

A SON OF THE MARSHES

AUTHOR OF
'WITHIN AN HOUR OF LONDON TOWN'
'ON SURREY HILLS,' ETC.

EDITED BY

J. A. OWEN

NEW EDITION

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS
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PREFACE.

THESE Annals of a locality almost unknown in its day to the outside world, whose native characteristics are full of quaint simplicity and old-world ideas, have been taken from the Notes of the self-taught Naturalist, the author of 'Woodland, Moor, and Stream.' At his request I have not given the real names either of the village described or of the characters depicted. All is, however, drawn "from the life"—a life rich in a colour peculiarly its own, whether as regards the primitive ways and thoughts of the Marsh-men, or the feathered visitants to the wild

and picturesque tracts which formed their environment.

Readers have already recognised a tender and sympathetic penetration into Nature in the writings of "A Son of the Marshes," as rare as it is delicate, and will be interested in discovering from the following chapters, which are to some extent biographical, how Nature herself educates her own students.

A small portion of the matter has already appeared in magazine form. I am indebted to the editors for their courtesy in allowing me to include it here.

J. A. OWEN.

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ANNALS OF A FISHING VILLAGE.

CHAPTER I.

MARSHTON AND THE "MA'SHMEN."

MARSHTON, at the time of which our annals treat, was little more than a straggling fishing village; yet it had a wonderfully interesting history of its own, reaching back to the time when the kings of Kent had their palace there. This palace was burnt by Earl Godwin in the year 1052. In King Alfred's time the town was attacked by the Danish pirate Hastings. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth a large trade was carried on in the place; and, in the time of Charles I., it was a royal manor held in dowry by the queens.

The Portreeve was chosen annually at the Court leet, said to have been instituted by King Alfred the Great.

You may know a marshman—or a man of the "ma'shes," as he is locally termed—wherever you chance to come across him, by the way he grasps his stick. In his native marshes it was rather a pole than a stick that he carried—one about as thick as your wrist and pointed at its stoutest end. As a rule, a "ma'shbird" has a grave demeanour, and very deliberate he is in action. At the same time he is hot-tempered, and, if roused suddenly, becomes as quick of motion as one of his own dyke eels.

Fifty years ago the dwellers in the marshlands were a distinct race, quite apart from the people of the inland towns, whom they always styled "furriners." That long monotonous belt of land just within the sea-wall would have ill suited people used to social gatherings. As a rule, a man's companions were his gun and fishing-net. Our longshore shooters had, many of them, to trudge three or four miles night and morning to get to their fishing or shooting grounds. A man living only a mile away was looked on as quite a near neighbour.

Any active religious feeling amongst our folks was mostly of a gloomy character, or, at any rate, stern and uncompromising. Their surroundings and solitary occupations fostered this. They were very much in earnest; revival meetings were fre-

quently held on our flats which would quite eclipse any of later days. True, they had no organ or harmonium, but the wild roaring of the wind and the fierce rush of the tide made a fitting accompaniment to the loud rude eloquence of our *lay* preachers, the sobs and groans of the penitent, and the noisy hallelujahs of demonstrative believers.

When summer comes the longshore dwellers live for a time in the blessed sunlight. Marsh hay is mown or cut; the lush grass and other vegetation peculiar to the flats make fodder and litter for the stock in winter. After that follows reed-cutting; the beautiful tasselled reed is valuable for many purposes. The marshman has his gun with him as well as his hook or stake. No matter where he may be, or how occupied, he never lets his gun go far from his hand: "Ye never knows what ye'r goin' to run aginst," he will tell you.

It is a splendid sight, that of these flats covered with a luxuriant vegetation, when the afternoon sun lights all up, and a gentle breeze from off the water—just enough to make the rich grass sway a little—gives the wide expanse the appearance of a glorious inland sea of many colours, belted round in the distance by the woods at the foot of the uplands. One drawback there is to all this beauty: the bailiffs of marshland take heavy dues; ague and intermittent fever are rife. It is a sad sight to see

a powerful man shaking like a leaf, and his teeth chattering in his head on the hottest days of midsummer. If our folks smuggled in those days, who could blame them? Brandy was often of vital importance; spirit in some shape or other all of them had, either in the house or outside it. Laudanum too, in considerable quantities—what most people would consider most dangerous quantities. Now and again a few of the marshmen from the Essex side would come over to settle amongst us—a rare circumstance, and matter of conversation all over the flats. Still more rarely one would come from the fens of Lincoln, Cambridge, or Norfolk, with tales of marshes in comparison with which our own dwindled down into mere splashes.

There was a foreign element in the people; the women showed it more frequently than the men. Their dark hair and eyes, together with warm olive complexions, told their own tale. Finer-looking men and women than some of these you could not find. Tough as pin-wire too; had their constitutions been weak they could ill have stood the deadly cold of winter and the hot moist air of summer.

Autumn seems a short season to longshore dwellers; early winter they may call it more fitly. They take notice of the wild-fowls' flight then. If these shift about and are restless, the marshman judges there will be unsettled weather, and he looks

carefully at his reed-thatched house, if he lives in some nook or corner of the flats. He takes precautions that would seem strange to dwellers in towns, and prepares for the worst.

His long duck-gun in hand he is a human wader, and he moves over the flats with the deliberation of one of his own Jack-her'ns. But like the heron's, his movements are quick enough when his time comes. See him after a winged curlew on the flats —not on the ooze — and you will wonder at his speed. Any one who has chased a curlew with just its wing crippled, not broken, will know what I mean. Very rarely will the bird escape our "ma'shman."

Great changes have come to the marshlands of fifty and sixty years ago. How some of these came about we have tried to show in the following chapters.

CHAPTER II.

A CRABBING EXPEDITION.

ELEVEN o'clock had boomed out from the old tower in the ancient market-place of a sleepy old fishing town situated in the midst of wild marshlands, far from all busy scenes of traffic—a place apart, as it seemed, from the rest of the world. The whole town appeared to be asleep on that hot morning in July, not even a dog was moving.

The fine old houses near the quay, which had originally been the homes of wealthy Dutch merchants, but had been long ago turned into warehouses and mills, showed no signs of life. The old trees planted in front of them, no one could tell when, might have been painted ones, so still were they.

On the large quay itself things were not brisker. It was high tide, and excepting the splash of a

bucket or a swab that might be dipped overboard from one or other of the craft that lay at anchor in the calm water, not a sound was to be heard.

I said the whole town seemed asleep; most of the men were really so—for the population, with very few exceptions, were all engaged in the same occupation; and the boats having come in on the harbour tide from the fishing-grounds, the men had, to use their own phrase, "bunked it," whilst wives and daughters, well knowing the need their men-folk had of rest, moved quietly about their household duties, the children being still at morning school, except such as were supposed to be old enough to help in the boats.

Just before half-past eleven o'clock the first signs of life were visible in the shape of two fisher-boys coming down the stony pavement of the long main street. The elder of the two, who was about twelve years old, was lightly and airily dressed in an old sou'-wester, a shirt, and a pair of trousers. The shirt had no buttons; on his feet were a pair of old shoes, locally termed "crab shoes," because the toe-parts of the upper leathers had parted company with the soles, so that the shoes opened and shut with each step as he walked along. Under the brim of his sou'-wester, which was much too large for him, curls of brown hair showed on his forehead; and his merry blue eyes were full of life

and mischief as he talked to his companion. "Winder" was the nickname given him by the fisher folks. The name his friend rejoiced in—rejoiced literally, for he was always happy—was "Scoot," an abbreviation of "scoter," the black diving-duck of the coast. Gay, light-hearted Scoot was continually in or about the tide, dabbling or swimming; a regular young sea-dog, equally at home on the water or on the land.

Winder was tall for his age; whereas Scoot, a year younger, was short, stout in build, and of dark complexion—having closely cropped black hair, and eyes that looked dark brown or blue grey, according to the mood of the moment. His cheeks were always ruddy, and his teeth, which showed perpetually—for Scoot was always laughing, or rather grinning—were white and even; so that he was a pleasant object to look on. His dress—undress we might call it—added to the picturesqueness of his appearance. Down one side of his head an old red fishing-cap hung jauntily; his old blue guernsey was patched here and there with bits of canvas; his trousers were very short, and much the worse for wear; they were well patched about the knees, which they barely covered, and were held up by two odd braces, one of which had once been white, the other red. His legs and feet were bare, but he did not mind that. As he was wont to observe to

his shadow, Winder, "Crab shells flop and hinder yer, scootin' over the marshes an' slub."

Both boys carried sticks about eight feet long, with string wound round them. These were their "crabbin' sticks"; but Scoot had also a small fish-hamper made of unpeeled osiers, to carry the hard-pinching quarry in after they were caught. They were now evidently on the hunt for a third boy.

"Shel I hail him, Winder?" asked Scoot, turning to his mate with his hands up to his mouth, ship fashion. "Shel I hail him? He's sure to hear me, ef he's ashore."

"Yes, Scoot, yell it out." And filling his chest with air, Scoot shouted—

"Denzil-a-hoy! A-hoy! Denzil-a-hoy—Den-ee—Den-ee-e!" at his very shrillest.

This brought some of the fishermen's wives to their doors, and, in language more forcible than decorous, they bade the lads make sail quick, if they did not want to be wrecked.

Scoot and Winder wisely took the hint, and sailed swiftly down to the line of houses by the water-side.

"We shel find him here, Winder, ef he's anywhere outside."

"Give him another hail; go it, Scoot."

Out again rang Scoot's shrill voice, "Den-a-hoy! Den-ee-e-e-a-hoy!"

he kept a tame pewit in his garden to eat the slugs and other insects.

"Shan't go," jerked out the quaint, old-fashioned child, looking the pair full in the face.

"But we've got all ship-shape, purpus for ye, Reed-bird," said Scoot, in his most seductive tone; "an' we've got old Diver's pitch-pot to bile 'em in. We got him some reeds to burn when he pitched his skiff, so he burnt his pot out clean for us, a-purpose."

"Shan't go," repeated Denzil; "I'll get quilted. I wanted my dabblers on this morning to go in the reeds, and she put me these on," pointing to his gaberdine and clean linen collar; "nice, ain't it?"

And the child drew down the corners of his mouth in a way that made the two boys roar with laughter.

"Nice, ain't it?" he repeated. "I'd ha' had a reed-bird's nest this morning, if it hadn't bin for these; as 'twas, I nearly had it. No, I'd like to go, but I shan't," and Denzil turned his back on his tempters.

Scoot broke down Den's wise resolution by a master-stroke. In an offhand manner he mentioned the fact that a lot of curlews were feeding close to where they intended crabbing.

"'Reckly the tide turns they begins to work fur worms," he said, "close to the boat; they're same

as that dead 'un we brought yer, what ye drawed on yer slate, on'y live 'uns these is."

A change came over Denzil's grave little face—a transformation; his eyes sparkled and his lips parted in an eager smile.

"I'll go, Winder—I'll go, Scoot; but I must git home for dinner, an' it's nearly twelve now. I'll git to you after that."

"All right; make sail, an' git down quick. Scoot an' me's not goin' home to no dinner, but we'll wait fur ye. Git down yer gardin, cross the bowlin'-green an' into the big orchard, then inter the first ma'sh; we'll be waitin' fur ye by the perwentive ship. Ef old Budd see yer comin' he won't say nuthin to yer."

The boy was right there; old Budd was a good friend to Denzil. He liked well to have the little fellow near him, and he showed him the spots from which he could best watch what they called the snake-birds or wrynecks, and the saw-sharpening tomtits.

Half an hour later a small figure slipped out at the back of Philip Magnier's house and ran down the garden, crawled through the hedge, ran over the bowling-green at top speed, and through the orchard into the marsh, where he found his companions. Along the sea-wall they sped, in Indian file—Winder first, the child in the middle, and

Scoot behind, gaily shouting and chatting to each other on matters relating to fish and fowl. All fears of a quiltin' were soon forgotten; and Denzil's happiness was complete when, from a pool in the Saltings — the name given to the strip of land running between the sea-wall and the tide—from a pool surrounded by sea blite and bents, a solitary curlew rose, one of a flock: it had pitched there whilst the main body of birds were to be heard and seen screaming and wheeling round, showing the white parts of their plumage in the bright sunlight.

The little lad was speechless with delight.

Arrived at their crabbing-ground, the two elder boys were soon absorbed in the process. The strings were unwound from the sticks, and a piece of meat was tied firmly on the end of the string and thrown into the water, where it was quickly seized by the ferocious crabs. Just as quickly these were pulled up and shaken off into the basket; in a short time the boys had as many there as they could conveniently carry. Winding up the lines on their sticks, they made ready to start home.

"Where's Reed-bird?" cried Scoot. In their exciting occupation they had forgotten their little mate for a time.

With startled looks they dashed over the flat in terror: both well knew the treacherous nature of

the marshes, and what had happened there more than once within their own short memories.

They had not far to go, however; for in a shallow pool, which had fortunately a bottom of hard slub, they found Denzil up to his knees in water and covered with drift-weed.

"How came ye there, Reed-bird?" asked Winder in consternation.

"I thought ye was drownded, Den," said Scoot.

"But his coat an' his coller! My sakes! Reed-bird, wunt ye git a quiltin' this time. What got yer inter that?"

"I see a Jack-her'n, and I jest pitched in," said the child.

They helped him out, and cleaned him to the best of their ability; picked up their crabbin' sticks and hamper, and returned home more soberly than they had started out.

"I say, Reed-bird," said Winder anxiously, more than once, as they plodded along, "do you think it 'ull be a werry bad 'un this time? What'll ye do when ye gits home?"

"Git quilted," was the stoic reply.

"Shel we go in with yer, Den, an' tell 'em ye've jest bin down the ma'sh like, an' hed an accident?"

"No, you git to yer own homes; I'll be all right."

"Well, if ye sez so; but, Den, we shan't bile

none of these 'ere crabs till we sees ye, squalls or no squalls. An' ef ye don't heave in sight termorrow they'll keep another day."

Denzil turned up the long street and made for his home as fast as he could. He felt sure of being punished, but he had had a very happy afternoon, and the remembrance of it would help him to bear what was likely to follow.

"After all, my things is dry now," he said to himself, looking ruefully down on his clothes that had been so carefully brushed by his mother in the morning, "an' there's no slub-marks on me, but she'll know I've bin where I hadn't ought."

CHAPTER III.

THE HOUSE ON THE MARSH.

THE quaint old market-place had been built on the highest point of Marshton, which was situated itself on what might be termed a huge hillock rising out of the low-lying surrounding marshlands. It had only one long irregular street, which ran over this hillock, beginning at the shore on one side, and coming back to it on the other. All the houses were old, and most of them had gables projecting from the upper storeys over the rough stony pavement. They were quartered with massive oak timber, each house after a different design, as though the inmates had sought to please and suit their own individual tastes. They were mostly very well built, comfortable and warm—an important consideration, lying as the town did exposed to the strong winds from all sides. In a line along the water's edge were more imposing

edifices, a few fine large houses, some warehouses and wharves. These had originally been the dwellings and houses of business of Dutch merchants, for a number of these had settled in the ancient fishing-town of Marshton.

In Holland, as Sir William Temple states in his 'Miscellanea,' published in the seventeenth century, there had, up to this time, been "above thirty acts of state bearing on the curing, salting, and barrelling of herrings alone, with such severity in the imposition and execution and penalties that the business grew to be managed with habitual skill, care, and honesty, so that there was hardly any example of failing in that line."

The Dutch emigrants brought with them a better system of fishing than had been practised before on our coast. They it was also who built most of the massive sea-wall, and constructed the noted duck decoy near Marshton, of which the folks were justly proud; and where only bare hillocks, swamps, and tide-worn gullies had been, they made wide and fertile grazing-grounds for their cattle. Being so used to flat swampy land in their own country, they took naturally to our marshlands.

In a monograph on the state of Holland, Sir William says further, "that the benefit of their situation and orders of their Government, the conduct of their ministers driving on steddy and pub-

lick interest—the art industry and parsimony of their people,—all conspired to drive almost the trade of the whole world into their circle, while their neighbours were taken up either in civil or foreign wars."

All religions were tolerated in Holland at the time we allude to, and the Government offered a safe refuge to the persecuted. Owing to the consequent increase of population, as well as to their enterprise and industry, the Dutch were driven to seek employment beyond their own seas. Having to be on perpetual defence against the tyranny and encroachments of Spain, and obliged to combat her fleets, they became first-class sailors and energetic successful merchants, visiting every accessible port, and establishing houses of business wherever they could. Painstaking and industrious as they were, smaller profits satisfied the Dutch than were looked for by others.

A colony of French Huguenots had also settled round Marshton about the same time. Local traditions told how many of them arrived in sad plight, the fathers carrying their delicate wives and daughters in an exhausted condition through the mud and water, the young men bearing the little children in their arms, to find a resting-place on these sand links and barren flats. Although the Huguenot families settled down at first content-

edly, satisfied to be quiet and at rest from the persecution of their religious tyrants, in spite of the barrenness of their surroundings and hard days of toil with small recompense, there were amongst them many men skilled in fine arts and industries, who, after leaving their mark on the district, moved on towards London to find a wider field for their skill and their energies. But when Denzil was a boy there were still some direct descendants of the old Huguenot families to be found amongst the populations of Marshton and in the neighbouring hamlets. They had intermarried, some of them, with the native fishing families. Many of the names, both Christian and surnames, bore witness to this foreign element in the population, and many of their expressions too. For instance, if a boy were speaking of a bird's nest, he would say more often than not, "She *nides* there."

Philip Magnier, Denzil's father, was one of these direct descendants of the old Huguenot immigrants. Although he was, technically speaking, a workman of the more skilled sort, yet he was a genius in his own way. He had an inborn love of art, which had worried and harassed him, because it had never found the opportunity of full, or even partial, satisfaction in his daily life. His house stood outside the town; it was the last one on the marsh road. Like all the other houses on the flats, it

was low and solidly built, so as to stand firm against the gales that roared over the marshes at times, clearing all before them. Poplars were the only trees that grew on these flats; there were great walnut-trees in the old parish churchyard, and near the church some elms, in which was a noted old rookery. But on the flats proper only poplars could exist: these certainly grew there to perfection, however. In front of Philip Magnier's house was a row of them, beside a stream that flowed into the marsh. Beyond the poplars only a lonely farm was to be seen in the way of building or human habitation. The house was not more lonely than most of the marshland homesteads, and it could boast of a larger and more productive garden behind it than was common in that locality. This ran through a portion of reclaimed swamp, and was protected at its farther end by a thick old hedge separating it from the saltings.

There was nothing to be seen from the house all the day long, except the sea, the marsh, and the sky; nothing to be heard but the sound of the waves and the song of the birds, with the cries of the sea-fowl and other wild creatures that had their homes in or about the flats. No wonder the Magniers were a grave and silent family. Setting aside their father's inherited ways of thought and stern prejudice, they had never been one with the towns-

people, and they held slight intercourse with any of them, excepting those who were their relatives. Denzil had brothers and sisters, but as our object is to tell rather of his intercourse with nature and her children than of his family life, this narrative will not deal with them.

When the boy got to the house door his mother was busy outside in the garden, and when she came indoors she found him apparently occupied with one of his lessons for the next day, seated demurely at the great oak table.

"Ye're late in, Den, an' Larry's been here; his father says he wants ye to go up town and spend the day there to-morrow."

Denzil experienced a great revulsion of feeling; instead of the dreaded "quiltin'" he was to have the dearest enjoyment of his life—a whole day at the house of his father's well-to-do kinsman, in the large old-fashioned dwelling which was the paradise of his boyhood, the home of his great friend Laurence. Winder and Scoot were very well in their way, but Larry was more to him than they could ever be; for, apart from the fact of his real attachment to him, he was a relative—and this was a matter of pride and rejoicing to the boy.

His mother was well pleased that her husband's richer kinsfolk should appreciate her child, and the invitation to Den to spend the morrow at their

house made her forget to interrogate him as to how he had spent the hours since she had seen him last. So he went to bed as happy as possible, and, tired with his long walk, he was soon soundly asleep.

Next morning he was up early; somehow he must manage to see Winder and Scoot. They had planned to boil their crabs before going out in the fishing-boats, at the back of Scoot's father's house, in the bit of rough garden-land.

Breakfast was always at an early hour; before seven o'clock Den contrived to slip away down the saltings, and then up the street to some small houses in the fishing quarter of the town.

"Scoot, ahoy! Winder, ahoy!" sounded as loudly as Den dared make it. Although the tradesfolk and artisans were already at the business of the day, the fishing folk had many of them only just turned in after a long night's toil.

The click of two wooden latches was heard, and out tumbled the pair of inseparables, in the lightest costume possible.

"Come in, Reed-bird; quick though, mother's up-stairs. Them crabs is in salt water; we'll hev a real good bile. But how is it ye ain't got yer cruisin' suit on?"

"I can't come; Larry has asked me to go up

town an' see him. I've only run down to tell ye."

"Never mind us, ef ye're goin' there; them crabs 'll keep all right till to-morrow."

"I'll be here to-morrow, Scoot," cried the boy.

CHAPTER IV.

AT THE PORTREEVE'S.

BACK ran Denzil, as fast as his little legs could carry him. A few scolding words from his mother as she gave him a good scrubbing of face and hands; some admonitions as to how he should behave himself—quite unnecessary on this particular occasion, and quite unheeded—and Reedbird was chirruping gaily as he ran along over the flat, and walked more sedately up the stony street to his kinsman's imposing-looking house and business premises.

As I said before, Denzil's father came of a very good old Huguenot stock; that business had been in the hands of his relative's family, handed down from father to son, for a century and a half.

The English had made small progress in the manufacture of glass until the French immigrants

introduced their improvements into our country. We find traces of this fact in the names still used in the art, such as "found," which is the word expressive of the melting of the materials into glass, from the French *fondre;* hence also our word foundry. The kinney is the corner of the furnace, from *coin* or *cheminée.* To move the sheet of glass from the annealing kiln, what is termed the "foushart" is used, from *fourchette,* a fork — and so on.

The master was a fine-looking man, six feet two in height, a true gentleman in the best sense of the word, of courtly manners and dignified bearing; he held the office of portreeve in Marshton at the time I write of. The workshops were large and many in number; the painting and plumbing premises stood each by themselves. In one part were the huge iron melting-pots, with all the various appliances for casting the lead. They prepared all the materials they used themselves. One place was a special region of mystery and delight to the imaginative boy; that was where the designs for the stained windows were made, and the glass stained and burned. In those days artisans of the better sort had to master all the different branches of their special business. Apprenticeship to their trades was a very long and comprehensive affair. In this age of hurry and machinery a skilled

artisan may look long and vainly for the patient industrious apprentices of fifty years ago. Among the cabinetmakers, for instance, men are satisfied to learn to make only the legs of tables and to know nothing about the tops; which is all again that another man can turn his hands to. This is an age of progress: but is it all in the right direction? It is well to bear in mind, however, that at one time it took ten hours to make twenty pins.

The master's dwelling-house stood in the centre of the steep high street. It had quaint gables, grotesquely carved and ornamented. The overhanging windows of the upper storey projected far out over the pavement and the steps that led up to the front door. The master was one of the keenest sportsmen that ever handled a fowling-piece. His sitting-room walls were hung with pictures in French chalks, and beautiful French engravings after some of J. B. Oudry's paintings — Oudry, called by some the French Landseer, a pupil of De Largillière. These, with some really fine paintings, had been brought for him direct from France; no one ever asked how or by whom. There were also drawings done by Denzil's own father, and the boy never tired of looking at these; he would stand before them for hours lost in speechless admiration. If his father could do such as

those, why not he himself some day? But that was a sore point, of which I shall say more hereafter.

Philip Magnier's drawings and paintings were hung also in the stained-glass workshop. In one place you would see a grotesque face grinning at you, which had been copied from one of the gables outside. So well was the light and shade managed, that the thing seemed to throw itself at you from the wall. Yonder a snipe hung on a nail; here lay a mallard, just as he had been dropped from the dog's mouth. Over a chimneypiece was a brace of Spanish pointers. The chimneypieces themselves had been carved by workmen from Holland very many years ago; they were real works of art. Beams crossed the ceilings, and the spaces between them were panelled out in a curious fashion. In the living-room the quarried lights were of stained glass. There was an air of quaint richness about them that carried one far away into the past. The master, who was gifted with a true artistic sense of fitness, preserved all the original ornamentation of the house most religiously intact.

The walls of the fine old staircase were covered with oil-paintings, one and all relating to sport; all the wild life of the flats was represented; besides horses, there were long-dogs, as they were

called in the marshes, pointers, and curly-coated old English setters. These, too, were painted by Philip Magnier.

One thing always puzzled and distressed Denzil as a boy. He felt, and indeed he divined rightly, that their relative never cared to dwell on the fact that his father had painted so many pictures; and he knew that both he and his father tried to put a damper on his own longings and aspirations in the same direction. Still the old gentleman, courteous and kindly to all as his nature compelled him to be, would smile gravely at Denzil's undisguised admiration of his father's work; only he would bid him learn his trade well, and say that if a man meant to get on and to stand well with the world, he must stick to his business and not let his thoughts wander far afield.

Then Denzil would feel a sudden chill, and sadness would fill his heart, until his cousin Larry roused him by getting him out of doors to a merry game in the fine old-world garden that lay behind the house, or farther away still to the shore below.

The garden had high walls round three sides of it. Through a door at the farther end you passed into a spacious orchard, which was well stocked with fruit-trees. The garden had also plenty of stone-fruit growing up the sides of the old walls.

There were apples, pears, cherries, and plums of many sorts in the greatest profusion in their seasons. The garden and orchard ran down the slope, and a blackthorn hedge was all that separated them from the saltings and the tide.

Directly opposite to the portreeve's property a coastguard-ship, or, as the fishing folk called it, the Preventive ship, was anchored. There used to be three of these vessels within the short distance of five miles. Yet from the creek, in spite of these, the wives and daughters of the more prosperous inhabitants received from time to time mysterious packages, which were always opened in the privacy of their own chambers; and they appeared on special occasions in fine satin, silk, or brocade gowns which had never been bought in Marshton or the larger neighbouring town of Standbeck. A bottle of eau-de-Cologne, too, or a stout four-cornered green bottle, was found, oddly enough, from time to time inside a great codfish; and the poorest fisher-lass would have blushed for shame if, when she was married, she had not possessed a splendid bed-quilt of her own, made in patchwork of grand and rich materials arranged in most wonderful patterns.

Whenever the boats came in from a long line-fishing cruise, there was sure to be a meeting of

the lasses held, from which all the men-folk were rigorously excluded — though some of the younger might have been seen hovering round the neighbourhood until their sweethearts joined them.

To go back to Denzil in his kinsman's house. One great pleasure he had there was free access to a great scrap-book, such as those of our parents who were artistic or literary in their tastes always found time to fill and to enjoy. Nowadays the innumerable illustrated papers and magazines take the place of these cherished old volumes, which were turned over and over again during the long winter evenings. We read many more books than were ever obtainable in those days; but perhaps we fail to make what is good and beautiful and true our own as did many of our forefathers? Life is overcrowded; there is "no room in the inn" for many a heavenly visitant.

Denzil found in that collection all that the master had come across in the way of artistic odds and ends. There were engravings from the pictures of Stubbs, Gilpin, and other men of their time; sea-pieces of Vernet's, the French marine painter; odd birds from Bewick's works —some of the best of them, for the master's eye was critical and keen, and they are not all good—with here and there some from Audubon

and Wilson; not many of these latter, however. And this treasury of scraps the master would often turn over himself while the boy stood by; and he had pleasure in noting the silent delight and appreciation that shone in Denzil's face.

CHAPTER V.

OLD NANCE'S IRON POT.

ON his way home Den hailed his boon companions again, just to make sure of being one at the crab-boiling process next day.

"Come as soon as ever ye can, Reed-bird," said Scoot, "afore they waits us down at the boat. They're all big 'uns now, fur the big 'uns hev cracked up t'others: they'll be prime eatin', an' no mistake."

"I've got a fine prize fur ye," cried Winder; "what do ye say to that now?" and he produced a number of strange-looking small fish, strung together on a tarred string. "Father gev it me fur ye."

The boy laughed as he held out his hand for the fish; such windfalls as these added greatly to the joy of his young life. A fish, or an occasional bird given him by a fowling friend, would first be

copied on the slate he used at night, when his father gave him regular instruction himself in "the three R's," and then kept in some secret spot to be studied from every point of view, until it would keep no longer; then it had to be buried in the garden.

Some of his friends made collections of birds' eggs, but he never cared for these; he loved live creatures too dearly for that. Scoot and Winder had numbers of eggs strung in long festoons, from those of the great black-backed gulls down to those of the diminutive reed-wren. But they were a great charge, for the lads were obliged to keep them hidden somewhere outside in the garden. Not one of the fishing folks would have suffered a blown egg inside the house: it was looked on as extremely unlucky. If seen in the boy's hands anywhere near the door, scrub-broom or stick would be flourished most vigorously and effectually. The safety and wellbeing of their households depended on it, they considered. Neither would any of the fishermen's wives have used the feathers of sea-fowl to fill their pillows or beds, "they wus sich restless flittin' things, never at rest night nor day; an' their feathers would not let ye get to sleep."

Nor would one of the men have sailed out on a Friday, if the wind and tide served never so fair.

And of a child born at the time of flood-tide, they said that "ef so be as he died on land, he'd slip his cable sure, when his time cum, on the ebb-tide."

Denzil's treasures in the way of animate and inanimate nature had a very precarious footing either in the house or outside it. Copying a bird as well as he could on his slate was an irritating sort of affair after all, for it had to be rubbed out to make room for multiplication, which was "vexation" enough, as the old school doggerel has it. When some friend at last presented him with a box of colours and some pencils, his joy knew no bounds.

As soon as he got home that evening from his cousin Larry's, the first thing he did was to put away most carefully one or two scraps which had been given to him. With the exception of his visits to his kinsman's house, which were the red-letter days in his boyhood's calendar, Denzil had little to amuse and instruct him—indoors, that is to say. He had a very curious collection of pictures of birds and animals that had been given to him at odd times. They came from many sources, and were carefully arranged and treasured. In fact they were the only treasures he possessed, and where they had been torn or injured they were always mended and repaired with great pains.

Scraps from Bewick procured for him by Larry were there, with odd figures from Harvey's spirited drawings of animals and birds. Besides these, he had many a gay-coloured picture from the tops of the French fruit and glove boxes,—pictures he valued much, given to him by some of the fisher lasses, whose sweethearts crossed the Channel. All these he would turn over, and study again and again on those days, which were many, when the weather was too rough for him to be allowed to go out of doors. One happy day he was shown the two volumes of the 'Tower Menagerie,' the figures of animals there having been drawn, as he was told, by the best animal-painter of the day. They opened a world of interest and delight to the boy.

The rambles over the wild marshes and along the sea-shore, sometimes in the company of a friendly shore-shooter, more often with Scoot and Winder; his birds, fish, and pictures at home, and the instruction given him by his father,—very regularly and carefully, for he was a man of high principles,—formed Denzil's whole education until he was about twelve years old.

His cousin Laurence went daily to a good school at Standbeck; the master did not think it well for him to attend the only available school in Marshton, where the boys were, he considered, not all of them suitable companions for his son.

When Denzil was with his father's relatives he had to be very careful not to use the dialect of the marshes, nor might he use it at all in his parents' presence. He made up, however, for any strain he might feel this to be, by speaking it very freely among the fisher folk.

There was a picturesque little group at the lower end of Scoot's father's garden, close to the fence. A good iron cooking-pot was hung, gipsy fashion, from a tripod of stout sticks, and under it a fire was blazing merrily. The fire was fed with some broken-up tarred palings, not old ones; where they had come from, it would have been unwise to ask.

"The bilin' is jest done," remarked Winder, as Denzil arrived on the scene. "We couldn't get the pot as wus promised us, an' so we jest borrered this 'ere 'un from old Nance, without askin' of her. We shel tek an' put it back when we've done with it."

"But how did you borrer it, Winder, ef Nance didn't lend it to yer?" asked the more scrupulous Denzil.

"Why, ye see Scoot knows where she keeps her cookin' gear — jist over the fence it is, in her gardin; so we borrers old Bob Shrimp's boat-hook, an' hooks this 'ere pot out, an' off with it. We took Bill's hook back afore we started bilin', so were free of him like."

"'Tis her bakin'-pot," added Scoot with a

chuckle, "what she uses fur a ovin; we must giv' it a good swab out afore we chucks it over the fence agin."

But this effort they were spared; for just as the crabs had been taken out of the pot, placed in a piece of old netting, and plunged into cold water to set and cool, Nance herself appeared, showing her head and shoulders over the fence. She had worked herself up to a perfect fury, and in her right hand she brandished a formidable mop-handle. One glance she bestowed on her favourite baking-vessel and the use it had been put to, and then she gave free vent to her feelings.

"Oh, ye rips o' sea-cats! ye wreckin' combin' varmints, as 'ull live to be hung fur pirits afore ye die; a born nateral disgrace to the mothers as bore ye. What 'ull be the end o' ye?"

At the same time she was making violent efforts, as Winder said afterwards, "tu bust through the fence and board" the lads.

Without waiting to answer Nance's questions as to what would become of them, the three boys bolted with their precious net full of crabs, through a reed-bed which was close at hand; and they got away to a safe hiding-place, where, as they ate their fish in peace, they speculated as to how long it would take old Nance to "git the smell of 'em out of that there bakin'-pot of hers."

Poor old Nance! "Scolding Nance" she was nicknamed, because of her habit of giving her opinion to her neighbours before they asked for it. She was not bad at heart; in fact, she often showed great sympathy with the lads and lasses, especially with such as she thought hardly treated by their own folks. But she had a most wonderful flow of strong language at command, and her temper was the worst in that fishing quarter, as long as it lasted. It was generally very patiently borne with, and folks showed her as much sociability and kindness as she would accept, for she had known terrible troubles, having lost her husband and several sons, all at sea.

Many a hard-pressed wife and mother keeps her heart soft and tender by an occasional visit to the spot where the bodies of her loved ones lie under the green turf, beside the old church where they had worshipped together; but Nance had no such mournful consolation. Only when the winds howled and raged over the sea, near her lonely cot, she would hug her grief, rocking herself to and fro in anguish as she thought of those who had been made the sport of the restless waters.

It was strange how few of the fishermen and their sons could swim. They used to say, "What's the use on't? fur ef yer goes overboard in a gale

with this 'ere heavy top an' bottom fishin' gear on, why down yer goes to Davy's Locker, onless they gets holt on yer with the boat-hook, or chucks yer a spar o' some sort to grip, or lays ye a rope tu lay holt on."

They were right there; the best of swimmers must have sunk, hampered with those heavy tarpaulin suits and the weight of their great sea-boots.

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible] he was constantly [illegible] fishermen's [illegible] in the [illegible], when [illegible] at his work, [illegible] the [illegible] made by some members of [illegible] had gone as sailors into distant [illegible] he gathered [illegible] stories and traditions of the [illegible] about his own kith and kin,

on his father's side, which gave him cause to ponder; and his imagination was continually at work trying to fit all things together, which was no easy matter to his child's mind.

For his father and the master, as he was often called, were curiously silent as to the early history of their family. Their richer relative had a grievance against Philip Magnier; it was generally kept to himself, but it betrayed itself involuntarily at times.

Philip had incurred his displeasure by marrying to please himself instead of his family. This displeasure was never openly shown, but it was always rankling, and it embittered his mind against the family in the smaller house on the flats. Philip had fallen in love with "Louey"—Louisa—the daughter of one of the richest members of the fishing fraternity, a man of influence and of sterling honesty.

Being a true man, the lover disregarded the remonstrances of his friends, and followed the dictates of his heart. When the marriage was first proposed some of the older fishing gossips shook their heads, and said "they wished Louey all good luck, and him as was marrying her the same; but she was goin' tu step from her rank, an' it mightn't end well with her." But at any mention of difference of station, men, women,

and lasses were up in arms at once, and flew at it with all the heat of their native blood.

"What was too high for Louey? her family pedigree could also be traced back unbroken for generations; the man that first spoke of it had better keep a still tongue in his head about that, or they would keel-haul him. Louey was good enough fur any man livin' as cud properly valer a good wife."

And so the pair were duly married, and all went well with them as far as their home life was concerned; but the husband's friends, although they gave their consent, and acknowledged the pair when by chance they met, never really forgave Philip. A breach was made which was never repaired, not even at his somewhat early death.

Den resembled his father in features and bearing, and he was allowed to be Larry's constant friend and playmate, when the latter was not at school; but the child clung to his mother's people, and they to him. "He's the very moral of his father in looks, an' has his ways too!" they would say, "but he's Louey's boy, an' he's one of us. Open door tu him, an' warm hearthstone, whenever he likes tu cum tu us."

One morning Den went outside after breakfast in rather a melancholy frame of mind; the shadows

seemed to predominate over the sunshine in his life just then. He had been "quilted" the evening before, unjustly, for a scrape he had got into entirely through the fault of another. Generally he took his punishments stoically; if he had brought uncanny live things into the house with all their native ooze and mud about them, just when his hard-working mother had made everything clean and ship-shape, he knew it was aggravating to her, and that he was doing wrong; and the same if he tore his clothes, which she had made and mended so carefully, by reckless adventures in the neighbourhood of the mussel-scalps, and dyke-leaping, or the like. But if on a rare occasion he was punished when he had not deserved it, his naturally fiery temperament asserted itself, and the usually grave quiet child was suddenly transformed into a struggling and fighting wild creature, defiant of all his surroundings. On this last occasion an old crone, bent nearly double with the weight of eighty-six years, who had been a witness to the scene, had wagged her head, and, holding up one of her shrivelled fingers, had muttered—

"Tell ye what, he's got their blood in him, an' no mistake; ye kin tell where *he* springs from."

On the whole his was a stern school. That

[illegible] himself was good.
[illegible] training and training
[illegible] kind of religious
[illegible] Obedience
[illegible] their slightest
[illegible] to a degree
[illegible] rather simple

[illegible] stares the
[illegible] repairs in
[illegible] dreary
[illegible] sea-wall.
[illegible] in the
[illegible] rises in
[illegible] sides of
[illegible] the creek.
[illegible] did a
[illegible] as he was

[illegible] little
[illegible] expres-
[illegible] meet his

[illegible] and be
[illegible] to get out
[illegible] that passed along as they got
[illegible] kept in cash.
[illegible] be solved. I can show

you something that will please you to-day, such as you've not seen before, I can tell you."

Without a word Den ran indoors, and, as he caught up his cap, cried, "Larry's come for me," which would, he knew, be enough to satisfy them at home.

"Come back and git on your other clothes," called his mother.

But Denzil was already out of earshot.

"He's clean an' tidy, anyway," she said, as she turned indoors again; "but I du wish as he'd got his new jacket on."

Through the town and out on to the sea-wall on the farther side of it they went, without many words being spoken by either. Then across a flat and on to the main highroad that runs from London to Dover, which brought them to Standbeck, about a mile distant. After passing the school to which Larry went every day, they crossed over to the gateway of one of the principal inns of that busy road, over which her Majesty's mails and all passengers to and from London and Dover were carried by the splendidly horsed coaches of the day.

Den was still in ignorance of what he was going to see; for him it was enough that he was out with his cousin. But when Larry said, "What do you think of them now?" and he saw two

magnificent birds, which he at once knew were none other than a living pair of the grand golden eagles he had so often admired in books, he was speechless with delight and admiration, the other boy watching him with a merry twinkle in his eye.

It was some time before Den found his tongue. Larry by that time was occupied in watching the ostlers, who stood awaiting the morning coach.

"I never thought as they could be as beautiful as that," said Den at last. "I must get close up to them; I'd like to watch them all the day long."

The birds were chained to stands on either side of the great iron gateway, just inside the courtyard of the inn, where they were the objects of much curiosity to the daily passengers on the coaches.

"You can't do that, Den; they're not to be trusted. I've been over here watching them every day at dinner-time lately, and the ostlers have told me all about them. They used to have a longer run, but they've snatched up and eaten more than one cat that went too close to their stands after the bits of meat given 'em. So now they are chained up shorter, but 'tain't safe to go nigh them."

It was long before Larry could get Den to start

back home again, and all the way the boy could talk of nothing but those grand birds.

Two days later he was missed after breakfast. He had run away to Standbeck to satisfy his curiosity more fully as to the grand birds at the gateway of the old inn. When Larry left school to come home late in the afternoon, he found the boy sitting in an out-of-the-way corner, near the entrance, watching the eagles with an all-absorbing interest.

"You don't mean to say you've been here again by yourself, Den?" he said; "did they give you leave to come? My, won't you catch it when you get back if they didn't!" He could hardly get his cousin away from the spot, so fascinated was he.

The whole of the next day Den was kept a prisoner indoors by way of punishment; but he was not unhappy. He spent the time very pleasantly looking over his picture scraps. One of these represented a golden eagle. This was torn up without the least hesitation and thrown out of the window; for, as he observed very justly, it did not deserve to be called by the name. It was not at all like those grand birds at Standbeck.

CHAPTER VII.

THE WILD BEAST SHOW.

LARRY'S life had a wider and brighter range than that of Denzil; he saw more of the world beyond their own; in fact, any outside pleasures that came in Den's way were sure to come through this cousin.

One Saturday afternoon he came to the marsh house in a state of great excitement, and getting Den outside, gave him the wonderful piece of news that Wombwell, the prince of showmen, of whom the boy had heard with wonder and bated breath, was actually coming to a neighbouring town.

Larry himself had never seen a wild beast show, and he was full of eagerness and delight about it. He had managed to secure a long poster from a bill-sticker, which he had brought carefully rolled up in his pocket. This he unfolded for the benefit of Den, who, with flushed cheeks, devoured every item in it.

Wombwell's menagerie was at that time something of note. It was the only thing of its kind travelling in England, and one great feature about it was the really beautiful paintings on the outside of the large vans. They were painted by men who afterwards made a name for themselves, and were well worthy of admiration from more experienced eyes than those of our two boys.

Over the illustrated poster the cousins held a long and earnest consultation. Could it be possible that all these wonderful creatures were alive? How had they been caught and secured? and what did they live on? Did the lions and tigers roar loudly as they did in their native jungle and forests? Here were snakes as thick as a man's leg. Was it all real? They discussed and wondered over the matter until they had fairly exhausted themselves.

Larry informed Den that his father was going to drive him over himself to see the show. Boys could go inside for sixpence, the bills said; but Den had never been the happy possessor even of twopence, at the same time, in all his young life.

He left Larry with a mournful countenance; the more he thought of it, the less likely it seemed that he could possibly secure the means of going to the show. His kinsman had not offered to take him, and his parents, he knew, would not dream of granting him this gratification.

He went to bed that night in a troubled state of mind; that long wonderful poster would not suffer him to sleep. The difficult question where and how he could get hold of so much money, kept his mind on the stretch till the morning.

It was a long tramp to the town, but he would easily manage that if he could only procure the sixpence. And then, if he did get it, perhaps they would not trust him to go; they looked on him as such a little fellow, he thought sorrowfully. No, there was nothing to be expected from his father and mother, where shows were concerned, he knew. He decided to hunt up Scoot and Winder in the morning, and talk it over with them.

Next day he came upon the pair as they were expressing their joy over the news of the wild beast show by executing a double shuffle with their bare feet on the pavement outside their homes. They were both going, and had already got their sixpences in their pockets for the purpose.

"You're comin' with us, Reed-bird, of coorse ye are?"

"But I ain't got no money," said Den, dolefully.

"Why, ask yer mother for it," said the sagacious Scoot, "an' ef she sez no, fust off like, jest you worrit her fur it, same as Winder an' me did ours. We're goin', an' ye'll jest cum tu."

The boy could get no further suggestions out of either Scoot or Winder. "Worrit yer mother," echoed Winder, and the two went on with their double shuffle in a way that quite exasperated Denzil. He was not in the least inclined to follow their advice, and went home again, wearing a very dejected air. As the time for the show's coming drew nearer, Den moped about the house in a most miserable fashion; he could do nothing but turn over his scraps continually.

At last his mother noticed his restless, sad looks, and asked him if he was feeling ill, or what was the matter.

This made the tears flow down Den's cheeks freely; but he told her the cause of his misery, asking her most piteously if she thought his father could be prevailed on to let him have that—to the boy—vast sum of sixpence, and allow him to go to see the show.

"I'll ask yer father, Den," she replied; "I don't know what he may say to it—but if he says Yes, I'll not say No."

The mother did not gain her point very easily, and it was only on the morning of the day of the show that the sixpence was forthcoming and the permission he craved granted.

Those two good-looking young scamps, Scoot and Winder, were quickly informed of Den's good

fortune, and they called for him, wearing their best clothes, and having the bearing of patriarchs, as they told Mrs Magnier that they "wud look after Denzil, an' see as nuthin' happined tu him: an' they'd take pertickler care as he didn't lose that there sixpence, for they'd tie his pocket up like a purse till he got thear, an' then git it out fur him agin."

After a few more sage and valuable remarks, the trio started on their way, Scoot again reassuring the mother as to "thet sixpence."

It was a long tramp to the town where Wombwell was exhibiting, but the three happy boys thought nothing of it; and when at last they stood in front of the huge vans, looking at the pictures, they were lost in speechless wonder for some time.

Presently Scoot, in a very subdued voice for him, said, "This is wuth walkin' a good pair o' shoes off yer feet tu cum an' see. The picturs is wuth the money ef there wus nuthin' else."

Winder made the original and true remark that "he'd niver sin sich a thing in all his life afore."

Den could say nothing. He wanted to tarry a long time enjoying the painted animals before going inside; but the practical Scoot observed that "arter he'd got Den's precious sixpence out o' thet pocket, whear it wus wedged in so tight, they'd best go

inside the show; the picturs 'ud be thear when they cum out agin."

It would be impossible to describe the boy's delight when they were actually face to face with the wild animals they had only read about before. Den was in a state not easy to describe, and difficult for any who are not born naturalists to form any idea of. It was the happiest day he had ever spent; the way home seemed short as they discussed all the wonders they had seen.

The next morning, before he turned out to play, Denzil tore up some more of his scraps.

CHAPTER VIII.

WITH THE SHORE-SHOOTERS.

"That old voice of waters, of birds, and of breeze,
The dip of the wild-fowl, the rustling of trees."

IT was due to the influence of his mother's relatives that Den was allowed to roam so freely over the wild marshes, in the company of Scoot and Winder. He had also family connections who were shore-shooters, besides others on his father's side who farmed their own land as graziers; so that he learned the ways and habits of the wild-fowl, whilst becoming familiar with their outward appearance, and the changes in their plumage in the different seasons.

To most, the marshes round about his home would have seemed a dreary wilderness; but the birds were there, and that was enough for him. In the spring there were the plovers to look at as they ran over the flats, the snipe to watch in their hum-

ming upward flight, and what interested him still more, the redshanks playing their curious antics.

As summer drew near, the butterflies flitted about in the long marsh herbage; some of them were very beautiful, and a few now considered rare were then common enough on the flats.

But the early autumn was his chief time for observation. Then the waders came in flocks from their Northern homes where they had reared their young, to feed on the foreshore again. Comparatively few waders and swimming-birds breed in England. Those species that breed here migrate in their season to other countries, and others that breed beyond our seas come over to us again; so that there is a constant stream, so to speak, of countless hosts on the wing, either coming or going.

The plovers kept to the upland pastures, the redshanks and the snipes to the tussocky parts of the swamps, with little runs of water here and there; the ring-dotterels, in pairs, to any bit of shingle on the foreshore. Herons, moor-hens, and rails frequented the swamps, and a few terns dipped over the lagoons. The latter were not numerous here, for their proper breeding-place was miles away down the coast.

These were the birds Denzil watched in the spring and summer; a limited number, for such as finches and others did not live in the marshes.

In the autumn there was a change; then the dunlins came in thousands on the ooze, many of them with a great part of their beautiful summer plumage still on them. Sanderlings, stints, and knots, too, were there—not many of these latter in comparison with the others; but there were mobs of curlews, and they made enough noise too. A few grey plovers and the herons made up the show at this season.

When winter had fairly set in, the boy revelled in and about the bare district; for independently of the wild ducks and the springs of teal, the diving-ducks proper drifted alongshore with the black ducks—the scoters—from the open sea in rough weather, to feed on the mussels, cockles, and small crabs that were to be found in profusion in the creek. They dived for these; shell-fish in all stages of growth were found there. It was the young tender shell-fish they fed on. By the term diving-ducks, we mean pochards, the red-headed pochards or dun bird, and the scaup or frosty-backed pochard, with the golden eyes or mottled wings. These, with the common scoter or black duck, comprised the diving-ducks known in the marshlands. The real divers, such as the red-throated and others —not the great Northern, for that was never seen in the creek at any time, let the weather be what it might—with the grebes in winter plumage, from

the great to the little grebe, — these, with the mergansers, went under the one comprehensive title of sprat-divers.

The gulls were there in full force; the great black-backed gulls called cobs, and the lesser black-backed, the herring or grey gull, with the black-headed gull in winter plumage, and the common gull. At rare intervals, if the weather was very severe, the great burgomaster gull in immature plumage might be seen, grandly flapping up the creek, but not far up, only about a mile from open water. It was very rarely that one of these was shot; as the fishermen and the shore-shooters observed, they had got eyes behind them. They called these Hollanders, North Sea fowl. That pied wader and swimmer the oyster-catcher, or mussel-picker, was a rare bird round about the creek.

As to the black or brent geese, they fed on the long sea-grass, the *Zostera marina* of the botanist, which covers the slub ooze in places, but is not to be found in the sands. The geese are, as a rule, day feeders; but at times, if the weather was too rough for them to feed on the main shore, they would feed in the creek, evening, night, or morning, according as the tide served.

When this was the case, the shore-shooters would lay their heads together, to get on the blind side, as they termed it, of those wary birds.

The boy was not taken with them on any of their night expeditions—he was not old enough—for night shooting is dangerous on shore or afloat. Many a fatal accident took place there at times through the dim form of a shooter, as he crouched, being mistaken for a lot of birds.

Den contrived to meet the men often enough by day, however. He used to bribe their younger brothers and sisters with rough drawings he made of the various birds—if the drawings were faulty, they were sufficiently lifelike to cause a keen competition among his companions for their possession, —bribe them to let him know when the men were going shooting, and in which direction.

And besides this, as I said before, because he was related to some of the graziers, the owners of a great portion of the flats where the wild-fowl shooting was good, the men could often get permission to shoot over these more readily if they had the boy with them.

In all Den's wanderings over the flats, by the swamps along the saltings, the ooze, and the seashore, his sole object was to watch the birds. Scientific works on natural history he had rarely access to; primaries, secondaries, and scapularies he had never heard of. But he gained a more useful knowledge of all their haunts and ways, and, as far as he could possibly find out, of their habits

of feeding, varying as these do with the seasons. It is wonderful how familiarly close shy wild creatures will come to those who have a love for them; there is a sort of freemasonry between so-called dumb creatures and those outwardly quiet, self-contained characters who are the best naturalists. Den possessed the confidence of birds and animals in no small degree. None of the shore-shooters ever lost a shot through any incautious movement of the boy's when they had him with them. He was far too anxious to see the birds that fell to the shot, to startle them by the least motion of his own.

Sometimes, after the men had not seen or heard of him for days, he would suddenly spring up in their path when they had got fairly on the saltings. It was useless to bid him go home again. On one occasion when he had been threatened with a "quilting" if he did not turn back at once, he apparently obeyed, and the shooter thought he had got rid of him; but the boy popped up again, just in front of him, a mile lower down on the saltings, out of a patch of sea-blite. He had run at top speed on the other side of the sea-wall, after turning back for a short distance. For a moment the man was dumfounded, but he soon found his tongue, and gave full swing to it, calling Den by various epithets, such as no parent would use to his

offspring if he had any respect for himself and them.

The boy waited till the shooter had had his say, and then told him with great seriousness that he really must let him go with him to see the birds. He gained his point so completely, that he was not only allowed to go on, but when on the way home again, the man, finding that the little lad was dead-beat with the fatigue of their long day's tramp, carried him on his shoulder the rest of the distance, his gun slung behind. He had had no luck that day.

So uncertain is it, going after the wild-fowl, that many a time a party of shore-shooters will come home without a bird amongst them, after having been out since the dawn was breaking until nightfall. The fowl are here to-day and gone to-morrow to some fresh feeding-ground, their movements varying with the state of the tides or the weather. It is in nearly all cases a waiting game of chances, with the chances oftener in favour of the fowl than of the fowlers.

There was one spot the shore-shooters and fishermen fought shy of, a church in the centre of a dark wood on an upland above the shore. It has now been cleared, and fruit-trees blossom where there used to be dark recesses in which the white owls hissed and snored, and the brown ones hooted;

while the fox slipped about over the graves on his way to the marsh and the creek. Now and again, too, the unearthly yell of fierce cats was heard there. These were creatures no doubt once domestic, but which had long before gone wild in that wood, and had prowled and yelled there from time immemorial. The fishing folks, being superstitious, would not be persuaded that they were cats at all. They said that the yells were unearthly sounds proceeding from unhappy souls who were, for some dire misdeeds, tormented before their time, whilst their bodies rested in the lonely churchyard. They were, however, large ferocious creatures, that played havoc at times with the farmer's poultry. The farmers killed any of the cats they could get at, but many remained and wailed at nights round about the old church, which was hidden, all except the square grey tower, in the midst of the trees. Not one of the fisher lads would take his way by that church in the night-time, although it was a much shorter cut to their homes through the churchyard from the boats in the creek.

Men and their sons who would, without the least hesitation, put off in a storm to a ship's crew on the Goodwin Sands, fought shy of that wood in the dark.

Once only Den went there as a boy, but it was

in the day-time, when the sun was shining brightly, and the birds were singing in full chorus in the wood outside. Inside, the windows were arched, with quarried lights, and the glass was dim and yellow with age. There was only one window of stained glass. Weird old carvings on the pulpit sides represented the states of the blessed and of the condemned. There were old grotesque carvings on the ends of the seats also. It was a dreary place; those who ever worshipped there might have fancied they were pleasing their Maker by condemning themselves for a space, voluntarily, to a living tomb.

The boy said afterwards he felt as though he could not stop in it; a weird uncanny feeling took possession of him, a creeping sensation, as though he was in the presence of what was unholy and unnatural. He hurried out, and never went there again until many years afterwards, when the dark wood had been cleared away, and the ground had been grubbed up and the place converted into blossoming fruit orchards. That small fishing hamlet, with its scattered homes dotted here, there, and everywhere, like rooks' nests in the elm-trees, has been improved away, and a cheerful village now stands in its place.

The narrow winding road that led to it from the old coach-road to London has been widened, so

that it is no longer necessary for the farmers who drive their waggons there to put peals of bells on each of their horses, to give notice by their jangling music that they have entered the lane at one end, and therefore there will not be room for any other waggon to pass them in coming up from the other side.

But in spite of all improvements—railways and good board schools—superstition and religious fanaticism still have a great hold on the country and fisher folks in the out-of-the-way hamlets on and about those flats.

It was near the spot I have been describing, that deluded or deluding Courtenay fell with a number of Kentish peasants, riddled with bullets from the muskets of a company of soldiers, whose commanding officer Courtenay had shot with a pistol when he was endeavouring to parley with the rioters. Den's father saw the fantastic impostor as he lay dead on the ground at that fatal gathering-place. That was soon after Denzil's birth. His mother also saw and heard him address the people in the neighbourhood of their home.

Our readers will most of them be familiar with the details of what was called the Courtenay delusion of the year 1835. Long after the more educated people in and about Canterbury had ceased to believe in the man who called himself

the Knight of Malta and the King of Jerusalem—and who went about in a gorgeous crimson uniform, attended by two gentlemen of highly respectable position, with a sword at his side, and wearing a long flowing beard, which was very unusual at that time—the country folks in the North Kent marshes believed him to be what he proclaimed himself to them, a second Messiah, sent to deliver them from their poverty, and to give them the wealth of the city of Canterbury. He shot a constable dead who tried to stop his proceedings; and it was then that the military were ordered out to put down what had become an insurrection.

The whole population of one prosperous village worshipped him, and many, indeed, died for him, after making a most violent and determined charge on the soldiers.

Courtenay's real name was Thom, and he was, in point of fact, an insolvent brewer; but even after he had been confined in an asylum as a lunatic, the poorer people still believed in him, although the loss of his flowing beard and his grand uniform had made a great change in his appearance. Besides those who were shot, others of his followers were tried for murder; for they had fallen upon the first body of soldiers, who were unarmed. These were sentenced to be executed; but in consideration of their ignorance and the extraordinary fascination

exercised by Thom, they were allowed to go free again.

But even in this year of 1890, we can positively affirm that it would hardly be safe in the outlying districts surrounding that fatal gathering-place to mention with a sneer or a rude jest the name of William Courtenay. The descendants of those who followed him—a few of whom are still living there—believe in him to this day.

CHAPTER IX.

DEN IS SENT TO SCHOOL.

As to bidding him let the birds and his pencils alone, they might as well have told the boy not to drink when he was thirsty. His friends soon found this to be so; and when Den was about twelve years old his father concluded that it would be better for him to go to school; the birds claimed too much of the boy's time; he feared he would become too desultory and roving in his habits. Later on he would expect him to work at the same trade as himself: his desire was that the boy should become a good scholar in those studies which would conduce to improve and enlarge his own business; book-keeping he specially wished him to become proficient in. Den had no such ambition: his whole heart was in nature and art; so far he had tried to learn with a view only to increased knowledge in these.

It pained and disheartened him at times that his father frowned on his rapidly improving attempts to reproduce on slate or paper what he saw and loved outside. When he ventured to remonstrate with him, and to appeal to his parent's own love of art, and the—to the boy—really beautiful pictures painted by him which were hung in his kinsman's rooms, Philip only frowned the more, telling him they had done him no good in life.

"You think you can paint, Denzil," he would say in most disparaging tones. "You will never have the power or the means to become an artist; give it up, and be a good book-keeper, and make our business worth more than it has been to me."

The boy fretted in the chimney-corner over his books and slate. Sometimes, too, he would cast an appealing, longing glance at a stained-glass window which adorned the staircase of their equally obdurate kinsman's dwelling; but there was no pity shown, no relenting in the eyes of his stern parent, and "he had to hide all these things in his heart."

The window represented Christ wearing the crown of thorns. Philip Magnier had designed it, and had stained and burned the glass himself; in fact, made every part of it. It would have

done credit to a church: as it was, it graced the old oak staircase, and it had roused many vague images of beauty and goodness in Den, as he lingered on the stairs. It seemed hard and strange to him that his father, who had made that, would not sympathise with him in his own boyish efforts. Larry was the only one of his relatives on his father's side who understood him and admired his young work.

The window is there still, and when the sun sinks low on the marsh flats, the light flashes through its many colours and illumines the old staircase, suffusing the calm face of the Son of man with a clear soft radiance; but the boys, whose feet once pattered up and down the solid stairs, know the place no more.

"Yes, the boy must go to school," said both father and mother; he was getting to be out too much with the shore-shooters and the wild fisher lads. Philip Magnier went first and had a long private talk with the schoolmaster, and then Den was committed to his care.

The schoolhouse was in the same street as their relative's home. It was a far older building than even that old Dutch mansion. Every portion of the outside carved woodwork was of solid oak, but it had been long bleached grey by exposure to the weather.

Wide steps led up to a finely carved portico, which was as large as the lych-gate of any ancient southern county church. Through a massive six-panelled door you entered a long corridor, the walls of which were panelled with oak from the skirting to the ceiling. From this passage a fine old staircase, with solid oak balustrades and hand-rail, led to the long low schoolroom, which had quaintly shaped windows on one side only, the side looking over the flats.

The living-rooms used by the master and his family were all in the same style, of solid oak throughout. From the arrangement and make of those old quarried windows, with their curves and circles and lozenge-shaped devices, a soft light was diffused over the whole place; the fierce glare of a midsummer sun never made the old house hot or the light dazzling.

The gentle old schoolmaster was in keeping with these surroundings. Picture a tall, slightly stooping figure that had seen sixty-four years pass away, with all their changes of storm and sunshine. His features once seen were not likely to be forgotten: he had dark-grey eyes, under dark eyebrows, and hair that had once been nearly black, but was at that time grizzled in places. It was the lower part of his face that struck you most; for there was something in the firm set of his lips and the out-

line of his square chin that told you he was used to be obeyed rather than to obey, although at times a rare smile would light up his face for a time, transfiguring it. Now and again, too, his lips would quiver, in the effort to repress his amusement on hearing of some mad prank that had been played by one of his scholars. His voice was low and very persuasive. One of the most daring and impish of his boys once remarked, "That he believed the master could fetch a cuckoo off a bough in spring, if he only talked to it." But at times, few and far between, his voice rang out like a trumpet, having no uncertain sound. "That was when he was wexed," the same imp would have told you.

The master dressed in a quaint precise fashion. He always wore a swallow-tailed coat, short breeches gartered at the knee, fine white stockings, and low shoes with buckles. His shirt-front was frilled; he never wore a neckcloth or tie, but to a button of strange form was fastened a large turned-down linen collar. His appearance was altogether unique.

When Den went to school he took his marsh experiences with him, and his slate more frequently had birds than arithmetical figures on it. The kind, grey-headed old schoolmaster was larger-hearted than is sometimes the case with men in

like position. He often winked at the drawings, after turning up the boy's slate for examination. He was a man of liberal creed, having learned from the old black-lettered Bible he always used, a more hopeful and merciful faith in a God of love than that which was professed by the descendants of those stern men who had suffered for their creed in bygone days.

He even gave him a bird which had been shot by one of his own sons for him to copy on his slate one day in school-time; and after Den had drawn it to his satisfaction, he allowed him to go out with his son in the afternoon on the marsh to see more of the fowl.

One day, after the morning school was over, during the dinner-hour, Den went down with his schoolfellows to have some fun on the quay and about the old wharves. Old Bob Shrimp turned up there, and the boys, after playing a mad prank on the old fellow, ran whooping and shouting along. The shipbuilding yards were owned by the leading members of the religious community belonging to the Dissenting place of worship, which Den's mother's relatives frequented. The sons of the shipbuilder were Sunday-school teachers; they were kind to the lads, and allowed them to roam freely about amongst the work going on in their yards. As to the boats, many of their fathers

having vested interests in them, the lads were on and over them in all directions when they were moored to the quay. Many a narrow escape from drowning there was when that wild crew were loose.

Bob Shrimp had just put off from the quay, and Den was running with three others, all abreast, alongside the water, the tide being high, when his foot slipped and down he went into twenty feet of water. The lads were prompt and rapid enough, for one gripped him by the foot as he was sinking head downwards—the water was level with the edge of the quay—and then the others helped to drag him on to *terra firma* again, laying themselves flat on the gravel, and in their excitement making the business of rescuing poor Den longer than it need have been. I am sorry to say that the whole crew, Sunday scholars though they were, swore most heartily and fluently over the work. "They'd pull him in pieces, and be pulled in pieces themselves, afore they'd leave holt on him," they declared. When he stood on his feet again, he looked a miserably limp and dripping object.

"Wring him out," shouted one, "afore we cart him up street to the master."

Their confidence in the schoolmaster's kindness was shown by the immediate impulse that

prompted the boys to send one of their number to prepare the old man to receive Den in his half-drowned condition.

The kind schoolmaster looked very grave, but, without any words of reproof or questions, he called his daughter and gave the dripping boy into her charge, after assuring himself that beyond a ducking and a chill there was nothing serious the matter. Den was put to bed, a warm drink given to him, and his clothes were set before the kitchen fire to dry.

Then the master went back to the schoolroom and lectured his pupils very severely on their heedless harum-scarum ways. The impression made by this was considerably lessened by one of the lads afterwards overhearing him tell his son that their pluck and prompt action was really very gratifying to him.

The evening hymn was sung at the closing of the school with special fervour, and Den, who was present, rather pale, but in dry clothes, was regarded as the hero of the moment.

The kind daughter of the house had bestowed so much care upon his drenched clothes that no trace of the accident was visible, and neither father nor mother heard of Den's immersion.

The next morning the schoolmaster called him to his side at the opening of morning school, and

bade him read the lessons for the day, as was the usual custom, out of his cherished black-lettered Bible, standing at his side the while. No other scholar was ever allowed to do this, nor was any other able probably to read from it; but his father's kinsman,—as such Denzil always spoke of the Portreeve,—had taught him the Old English alphabet. It always seemed a delight to the old gentleman to draw out the child's intelligence. Had Philip Magnier and his relative been on happier terms together, Den's future would no doubt have been a more assured one, speaking from a worldly point of view. As it was, his visits to the house formed a large factor in his early education.

The schoolmaster's Bible was a masterpiece of printing and binding—a book to last for centuries. Each letter looked as clean and clear as if it had been brass. Although it was in the English language, it had not been printed in England. It was printed on the same tawny parchment-like paper as the few rare and valuable engravings which he possessed that had come from Holland. Heirlooms he said they were; they had been in his family for generations. There were dates and marks on them that confirmed his statement.

Some of the folks said that the grave-faced little scholar somewhat resembled the kindly old schoolmaster as he grew older. But they might also

have said that of some others amongst his boys, all of whom looked up to him with love and reverence. He was alike kind to rich and poor. Good clothes or shabby ones, it made no difference to him what his scholars wore; and they all knew it, and blessed him for it. When he died, he was regretted and missed by all of them. Many a hearty "God bless him" was spoken over the schoolmaster's grave. Philip Magnier went always to the old parish church, as all his relatives had done since they settled in Marshton; but his wife's people belonged, like most of the seriously-minded fishermen's families, to a Dissenting society; and after Denzil began to go to school, he felt a distaste to the sleepy services which he had always been obliged to attend with his father, and he begged to be allowed to go where most of his companions did on Sunday. Scoot and Winder were regular attendants at the Sunday-school of the Congregational Chapel. Dissent was strong in Marshton, and freedom in religious matters had been handed down to these people with their earliest traditions.
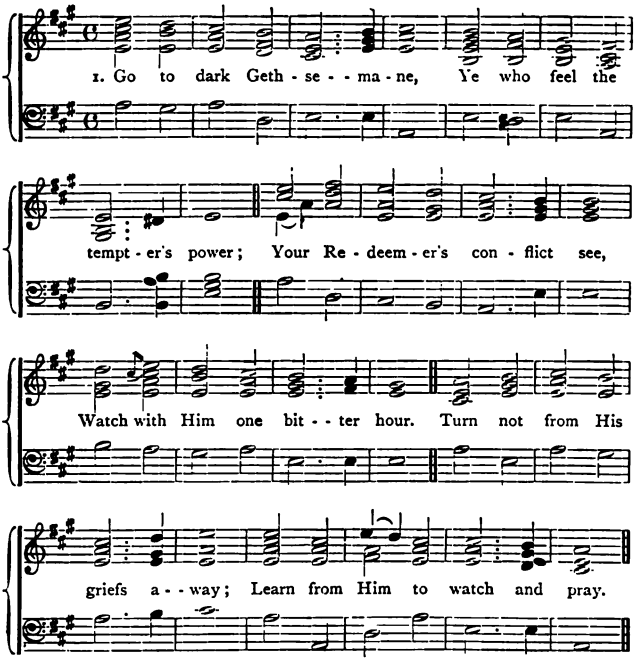
If Denzil preferred to go to chapel, said his father, why, then, he was free to do so; but go somewhere he must. He would have no Sabbath-breaking in his family. The children might choose for themselves when they are old enough to have serious thoughts on the subject, and then they must stick

to their choice. Den, having a warmer feeling towards his fishing and fowling friends than towards other classes in the town, went with them also in religious matters. He still possesses the medal he received with other Sunday scholars, which was struck as a mark of remembrance and given to those who collected for that noted missionary ship the John Williams.

In all weathers the boy went with his fisher friends to the outdoor religious gatherings which were held on the flats. He was with them on one long-remembered day, with his true comrades Scoot and Winder, holding a hand of each, as they marched in solemn procession from their meeting-house in the fishing quarter of the town to the flats, singing as they walked. Will he ever forget that scene? First came the men in their heavy fishermen's boots and guernseys—bronzed, well-set, stalwart figures many of them; after them walked the women, followed by the lasses without bonnets, their shawls thrown over their hair; next to the lasses came the children, with simple, earnest faces, full of the awe of the moment.

Forming a line on each side of this procession the fisher lads marched in time, singing that hymn of James Montgomery's, well known in the Kent marshlands by the name of "Gethsemane." I

give it here from an old collection of tunes by R. Rogers of Sheffeld—



2. See Him at the judgment-hall,
Beaten, bound, reviled, arraigned;
See Him meekly bearing all:
Love to man His soul sustained.
Shun not suffering, shame, or loss—
Learn of Christ to bear the cross.

3. Calvary's mournful mountain view;
   There the Lord of glory see,
   Made a sacrifice for you,
   Dying on the accursed tree.
   "It is finished!" hear Him cry.
   Trust in Christ, and learn to die.

4. Early to the tomb repair,
   Where they laid his breathless clay.
   Angels kept their vigils there:
   Who have taken him away?
   "Christ is risen!" He seeks the skies.
   Saviour! teach us so to rise.

The fine old melody sank and rose again, borne by the wind from the sea over the bare flats. Many who were drawn from mere curiosity to see the enthusiasts walk past, felt something rise in their throats that silenced all idle comments, as they listened to the clear voices of the children. There was something contagious in the earnest and stirring sight; a power stronger than themselves moved the lookers-on, so that men, women, and children with one accord stepped from the pavement as the last of the procession passed by, and joined themselves to it.

The simple fishing folks about Marshton had never heard of exciting revival times, such as we have nowadays; but in all they did there was an originality and thoroughness peculiar to themselves,

and which seemed to be foreign to the people of the neighbouring towns.

The Sunday-school, to which Den now went with Scoot and Winder, was away from the chapel a little distance. Of all plain buildings, both inside and out, it was the plainest. The bare walls were roughly whitewashed, and long deal forms, placed in suitable position, formed the classes for the scholars.

Den's teacher there was a fine old seaman, one of the smartest that ever walked a vessel's deck. On one memorable Christmas-day morning he stood up to address his class of boys on the subject of the Nativity of the Lord Jesus Christ. By common consent the rest of the teachers stayed their teaching in order to listen to him. The eyes of all present were fastened on the handsome bronzed face which shone with the fire kindled within by the subject on which he spoke.

His eyes, so keen and direct in their glance when he was outside, had a far-away look in them, as, in earnest tones, he dwelt on God's wondrous plan for the salvation of fallen men. He told the history of the Son of man from His birth up to the final scene on Calvary. In strangely agitated tones he spoke of the earthly ending to the life of Him who had wept and mourned over Jerusalem. In his words there was no sectarian spirit of bigotry, his

fervent address was free from cant and idle repetition. His religion was, as all knew, a matter of daily life, not put on with his coat on Sundays; and all were moved on that Christmas morning as they rarely were. Tears rolled down the faces of many men and boys who were seldom moved to any outward show of feeling.

Perhaps he had a presentiment in making that touching address that he was speaking there for the last time; and that far-away, rapt look in his eyes came from an inward conviction that the Master would soon call him to Himself. Who can say? Before teachers and scholars had met again the old seaman and his vessel had gone down at sea, there to rest until the command shall be given to the sea to give up her dead.

Alas! that in the same Sunday-school with that true old Christian there should have been so unmitigated a hypocrite and humbug as the skipper who went by the name of Old Grab, who, after standing up in that room to "testify" and "to give thanks fur crownin' marcies vouchsafed to him on his last voyage," went home to get drunk on his smuggled brandy.

That irrepressible salt-water sprite, Scoot, remarked, after one of Old Grab's public thanksgivings, that "the old varmint put him in mind of a biled owl."

There was more in Scoot's comparison than might be generally understood; owls were not regarded with favour by the coast people. Strange rites were observed by some of the less godly of the marsh folks; and an owl, parboiled, with its feathers on, was supposed to have some very peculiar and close connection with the devil.

CHAPTER X.

OLD TITLARK'S DOMAIN.

THE sexton of the marshland church by the sea knew more about grave-digging than he did about ornithology. He got the nickname of "Titlark" because of a nest of the meadow pipit, or titlark of the flats, which he had found once. It was full of young birds; he reared them carefully, but always insisted that they were skylarks, until at last he was obliged to confess his error. He was notoriously self-opinionated, and the lads were jubilant when they could catch him tripping in any matter. When a son was born to him, he too, according to marsh custom, was called by the same name. As long as they remained in the marshes, they were known as old and young Titlark.

Folks were long-lived, as a rule, about Marshton; a funeral was quite an event there, and one which the sexton made the most of. He would be seen

coming down the street in the direction of the churchyard, with his bright shovel and pick on his shoulder, followed at a respectful distance by the younger Titlark, who carried a coil of rope in his hand. He had a gruesome way, intended to be humorous, of telling the numerous acquaintances he met, as he walked slowly along towards the church, that he was going to bury them.

The village lads always said that young Titlark's life was rendered bitter to him by the fact that he had to polish that shovel and pick every Saturday, when he cleaned the family knives and forks. The amount of bathbrick used on those two implements was something fabulous, according to their account.

The churchyard was shaded by finely grown old walnut-trees, and one of Titlark's duties was to see that they were properly thrashed down in the nut season. The old crones of the district stated—and it was a matter of fact—that "when we fit old Boneypart, some consarned in the Guv'nment cum 'an' offered a lot o' money fur them big walnut-trees fur tu turn 'em inter musket-stocks; but them as had tu du with 'em and the church wouldn't hear on it."

When the men thrashed those trees, Titlark used to tell them they need not be very particular in picking them all up; he could see to that when he straightened up after they had done. The hint

was always taken, and Den, Scoot, and Winder used to help over the work and secure a goodly store for themselves. Those walnuts were fine, and thoroughly appreciated by the three boys, who were favoured in being allowed to assist the Titlarks in their manifold duties, in consideration of Denzil's relationship to the Portreeve, who had the business connected with the plumbing and glazing, and other matters needing frequent attention, in the old parish church.

As winter drew near, the primitive warming apparatus inside the building had to be got into working order again; and that was one of old Titlark's times for having what he termed a "reg'lar rootin' out."

The only bit of work inside the church that he would intrust to Titlark the younger and our three friends, was the scaring and routing out of the white owls, and poking up the bats that had undisturbed possession there for many months in the year.

That was the time for more larks than one. The four became so energetic over their work now and again, that old Tit would rush from subterranean regions underneath them, and ask what they meant by "whoopin', hollerin', and rampagin' about in a church in that scandalous fashion, like so many young cart-hosses."

They did certainly wake the poor owls up most effectually, causing them to mop and mow in their fright like so many feathered lunatics. As to the bats, young Tit said, "I has 'em along o' me a goodish bit at times."

He confided, as a profound secret, to the three boys one day, that he'd heard his father tell his mother that "*Things*" (with a large T) had been seen coming up the long churchyard path of a night, and some of them were moving over the graves, but they made no noise—the true figure of them had never been seen plain.

Scoot and Winder exchanged significant looks.

"Did yer father tell it to yerself as well as to yer mother, Tit?" asked Winder.

"No, I on'y heard him; he didn't know as I was by."

It might be thought only a curious coincidence, perhaps, but the evening of the day on which young Titlark repeated this to the boys—Winder was getting a well-grown lad now, and in the confidence of his father—as soon as it was dark his father, and Scoot's with him, lounged up to Titlark's house, where they remained in close conversation with him for some time, after which they left him in most friendly fashion.

Next day young Tit was seen looking out of his bedroom window in a very doleful fashion. Scoot

noticed him, and observed to Winder that he'd perhaps "bin 'bliged tu hev sum med'cine o' some sort or other."

It was true in a sense, but it was an application of ash stick administered to him by old Titlark, which gave him severe tingling sensations not soon forgotten. After that he never told again of "Things" being seen in the churchyard.

Titlark junior did not take to his father's profession. The polishing of that shovel and pick proved too much for him. He bolted one day and enlisted as a soldier, dying later on, sword in hand, in India. Poor Tit! there was much good in him.

There were many things about which a lad had to keep his tongue "'twixt his teeth," as they said in Marshton. Any tripping and indiscretion in conversation was apt to be visited sharply on the offender. Not that any dark or desperate deeds were committed, but smuggling was held to be a very venial offence; whilst the life of a babbler or tale-bearer was rendered impossible to him in the marshlands. The simple fact was, all smuggled when they got the chance; the part of the coast where Marshton lay was notorious for it. It did not in the least interfere with their duties as fathers or husbands, nor yet with their religious ones.

Most of them went to chapel, and a few to church. If one was caught in the act of importing without paying Cæsar his dues, he suffered for it, and suffered without complaint. Tradition said that once or twice those who had been captured had implicated others. They paid the penalty for doing so. "'Twas on'y them as hed furrin blood in 'em as did thet," the crones said. Lifelong banishment from the marshes was the result, and their names became a by-word in the fishing quarter and along the shores.

From what I have been able to gather, the practice has not yet quite died out there; but that is a matter that does not concern us here.

There were some weird and ghostly stories connected with old Titlark's domain, invented doubtless, many of them, by the bolder spirits and keener wits on the flats, to suit their own purposes. It was rumoured that figures had been seen rising out of the flat-slabbed, moss-covered tombs. Winder and Scoot believed in these tales most firmly. Winder could have told, had he been so indiscreet, that not only did ghostlike forms arise, but they also disappeared beneath the great stones bearing strange-looking packages in their arms. Some of the slabs, massive though they were, moved easily, if you were let into the secret.

Another story circulated freely to the effect that creatures like huge bears had been seen rushing over the flats and through the churchyard at a terrific speed, yet in perfect silence. Many of the fisher lads and lasses could swear to having seen them when coming from their boats through the marshes.

CHAPTER XI.

A LONGSHORE RAMBLE.

FORTUNATELY for Denzil's development as a naturalist, if not for the family exchequer, the branch of trade at which he and his father worked gave them little or no employment at certain seasons of the year; so he was able to give more time to the pursuit of knowledge of the ways and haunts of the wild-fowl than his elders approved. At an early age Den kept a note and sketch book, which he found valuable in after-life.

One day, in his wanderings, he found himself on a long strip of sandy beach quite different from that part of the shore which he more commonly frequented. It was on a fine day in June, and very hot; a blue dancing mist hung over the water and the shingly sand-blown beach. This spot was higher than the parts Den had already traversed; coarse sand, large stones, and pebbles, mixed with

broken shells—all above high-water mark—composed the flooring. Scattered here and there were stunted blackthorn bushes, which struggled for existence, blown all in one direction by the fierce winds that swept up from the sea. Low, tough, trailing brambles crept over the shingle and larger stones; and where there was the least chance of nourishment, long wiry grass shot up all round about.

It was a dead calm on the water, not a sail was in sight, for little trade was doing. Out on the water, about a hundred yards or so from the shore, a couple of herring gulls were fishing in their own fashion. They were not very common on that shore, and when disturbed were very shy. Seeing something moving, they flapped right out to sea. Nothing was to be seen except the guard-ship a mile or more away: he had to pass close to her as he jogged on, for she was moored on the flats, and surrounded by the water at high tide. "A rest will not hurt me," Den thought, and he sidled round the stunted blackthorns, the highest of them not over four feet, in quest of a little shade.

Sitting there very quietly, thinking of nothing in particular, looking on the hot bright sand, he saw a flash of light run up a stone and rest on the top. It was a lizard on a fly-catching trip. Flies and many small beetles are very numerous about spots

like these. He was not more than a yard from Den, and he could note the peculiar rise and fall of his throat, and the play of his little tongue. This species is larger than the heath lizard, and his colouring is very different, being a shining yellow-green with darker markings, not so bright nor so large as the green Jersey lizard. He found many like him afterwards, but only one on that part of the shore.

A piping whistle sounds just overhead; looking up, he saw a pair of ring-dotterels, or sand-larks, as the coast dwellers call them, fly over and drop somewhere behind him. They have come from the salt flats close at hand. Another pair comes over, and then, when they have pitched, a feeble pipe or peep is heard. This was one of the breeding-stations of the common but beautiful little plover, or ring-dotterel, and Den intended to have a look at them. As he rose, master lizard made a bolt; a few more steps on the shingle disturb several more like himself, which scuttled off quickly under the stones and creeping brambles.

As Den advances the piping is heard more distinctly, quite close to him it seems. A pair shoot up from one side, and then settle within a few yards and pipe most plaintively. He has a full view of them as they stand on the bare sand and shingle, looking hard at him as they pipe; every

motion is as plain, and the plumage is as distinct, as though they stood there specially for his observation. The little breasts rise and fall in their great excitement as they pipe, their wings shift in short uneasy movements, and their little feet pat the shingle. It will not do to move: innocent and beautiful as the birds are, nature has given them the actor's art to perfection; one step forward on the lad's side and the pair would appear to be feathered cripples, one so badly wounded in the wing that recovery would seem impossible, whilst the other would be sadly afflicted in the legs and feet.

Denzil had no wish to alarm the pretty creatures, nor to look for their young ones that were huddled up in some hollow by the side of one or other of the larger stones which were scattered about here and there.

In all his longshore shootings—and he was early intrusted with a gun—he never shot a dotterel; the coast men do not care ever to hurt them: the birds have robins' law.

Leaving the part where the dotterels breed, Den takes a track leading to the salt flats. Here the sea-kale or wild cabbage grows in abundance; the place is covered with it for long distances, a break here and there being caused by the grey sea-blite. Then comes rough shingle and wiry grass.

At this point the coast-guard meets him. "I was looking at you through my glass," he says; "there's not many would care to rest on that ground: there's too many things running about; that bit of beach has a bad name, my boy; it is run over with poisonous creatures, folks say." In spite of Den's assertion that they are quite harmless, he shakes his head, and assures him they are just like some things he was acquainted with, when in foreign parts, which were deadly poisonous. Birds are different, but all reptiles he holds in horror. Den does not stay long here, but passing over the saltings—the strip of land between the sea and the sea-wall—enters the marsh. In the distance a dark belt shows, fading in a long line into the swamp lands, the marsh fleet or lagoon. Keeping close to the edge of the reeds, he creeps along. Wild ducks paddle out with their flapper brood in numbers, and make for the other side. Moor-hens flap up and squatter on either side, and a general commotion ensues. Something shoots out from the tangled roots on which the lad has placed his foot. It is a large eel—the water abounds with them; they make short work of any young of the reed-building birds that may imprudently have wished to see the world before they were fit to travel. You will find the eels gorging wherever other fish spawn and the birds have their

—weet, weet, pewit — weet. They have their young with them, and as Den passes quite near, they go through their clever broken wing and leg performance, even falling to the ground in a dying state. No need for it all; he does not intend to molest them. As he proceeds a redshank or pool snipe comes to meet him, yelping his loudest, starting up a couple of hares from the mole hillocks. These hillocks are covered with fine herbage, the best feed in the marshes. One farmer there had all his land levelled; he was not the first to do so; and even now many a one is ignorant that the long-nosed little Hercules, the mole, is a good friend to the farmer or stock-grazier, making the ground fruitful by his labours.

The herons do not frequent this part; the water is too deep for them. It is not brackish here; still it is unfit for drinking, flat and soft to the taste. The fresh streams that run into the flats from the higher grounds filter through the spongy soil and fill this large hollow. From this again it filters through to the dykes near the sea-wall. The brooks that find their way here are to all appearance rapid ones, and you would expect them to be full of fish, but it is not so. We have searched them: plenty of long green weeds are there, but all our pains only resulted in sticklebacks, or, as they call them there, crow-fish. The streams that run from

the water-meads down to the salt water, on the contrary, have plenty of eels and flounders. The head of these streams was one of the favourite resorts of Den's boyhood; he got many a quilting for going there.

It was a water-lane—a public way for any cart-horse or cow that the owners might think fit to take there—as wide as an ordinary road; high and very steep banks were on either side, covered with ash and alder. All sorts of tangle flourished close to the water, which was never more than a foot deep, and in some places not so deep. Water-cress, and a thick growing plant they called water-parsley, covered the bottom, except where the current had made a clear lane through the middle. One day Den was going through this with the miller's son, when a fine silver-bellied eel dashed out from the weeds where he had been concealed; they could follow his course for a long way down the clear bed of the stream. This excited Den; but when his companion told him not only eels in plenty but also dabchicks were to be caught, the temptation was too much for him, and he quietly planned an exploring expedition with one or two companions whom he knew to be always ready for sport.

They started from home on a morning fixed

upon between themselves, trim and neat, as their mothers liked to send them to school; but instead of going there, they hurried away up the water-lane to capture dabchicks and big eels. The plan of campaign was that two were to pull up the weeds and water-cress by the roots, and the other two were to catch the eels as fast as they were dislodged. But, alas! the eels bolted out between the small hands and legs so fast, that they were only as so many flashes of light in the eyes of their would-be captors; and in their eagerness they only fell over each other in the water. Then they fought all round because the job had not gone off as they expected. The uprooted weeds floating down the main stream told their own tale; and when the four boys found their way back to the starting-point, their mothers were awaiting them there. I will draw a veil over what followed. To be "quilted" by their fathers was bad, but there was a humiliation about the whipping from the maternal hand which is not easily described. In spite of chastisement, as the four grew older they gained experience. Dabchick or water-rail both had to look alive when they were on the hunt; and when the gates of the tidal mill-pond were up, few flounders or eels escaped their spears. The younger children idolised Den and his friends, for

they used to carry them on their shoulders through the swamps, and make whistles for them from the willows and reeds, which filled them with joy. Not so their mothers, who declared they drove them frantic with their tootlings, and the bigger lads ought to know better than to start them making such a noise.

CHAPTER XII.

FLOTSAM AND JETSAM.

In Denzil's time the saltings and the shore, with the slub, was No-man's Land, as far as a man's legs could carry him on a long day's prowl. There were boards fixed on stout poles, here and there, which set forth in complicated legal terms the rights of certain individuals to the flotsam and jetsam of the foreshore, with all privileges thereunto belonging. But these were unheeded; no one stopped to read them. On a warm summer's day the folks would have fallen asleep over so tough a job, and in wintry weather, with a gale from the nor'ard, fowl coming up off the sea, and the salt spindrift making your eyes smart, you would not care to spell the matter out.

One hoarse-voiced, hardened old sea-dog, I well remember, who was ordered to replace a certain portion of cargo on the spot where he had found it.

This he refused to do in the strongest nautical terms at his command, offering at the same time to fight the matter out there and then. On this he was mildly requested to look at the notice-board close to him. "He was no scholard," he replied, and had no desire to be one, with a few round oaths directed at those who were. However, he was compelled reluctantly to give up the treasure-trove—in this case a couple of two-gallon casks full of spirits, which had been half buried in the sand.

The excise officers had work to do in those days. Sometimes a swift-sailing boat, whose only fault was that she carried a valuable cargo, would be sawn asunder in the middle and sold to make fishermen's huts of.

Police proper there were none, only a constable. He was a mason, and a mild-spoken individual. There was little he could do, but it was considered essential to the dignity of the locality that it should possess a constable! Sometimes a serious dispute would take place over a small portion of flotsam, and the matter would be fought out on the shore —the conqueror carrying off the spoil, and the vanquished receiving a "quilting." Then was the time for the Marshton constable to show his authority. On getting home from his work the matter would be reported to him, the effect of

which would be that he would sit lost in thought for about half an hour.

Then he would have his tea, after telling his wife to send the children out to play. Tea over, he attired himself carefully in his church-going suit, composed of fawn-coloured trousers, low shoes, blue swallow-tailed coat with brass buttons, a stiff satin stock, and a waistcoat of most dazzling splendour in the eyes of the juveniles. It was made of strong thick brocade, that had been presented to him by some fishing (?) friend, and was bright grass-green in colour. The village tailor had done his very best at that garment; and on it were brilliant buttons, also the present of another fishing (?) friend. With a chimney-pot hat of antique style, he put the finishing-touch to his attire. How the boys used to admire the whole get-up!

Opening his house door he would request his wife to fetch him his staff and silk handkerchief, and he used to stand there in all his glory whilst she got these articles. That staff came from some old curiosity-shop. Originally, I am convinced, it had been a small idol in a heathen land. This he wrapped up in the silk handkerchief and placed in one of his long tail pockets. Then he started out, the wonder and admiration of all. As he passed down the long village street in his official

dignity, it would be whispered that he was "goin' to take 'em away somewhere an' lock 'em up!" That idol banging against his legs as he walked had a solemnising effect on the youngsters. It was taken out at the house of the transgressor, and a smart rap was administered on the door with it. "In the name of the law," they who followed would hear him say; then he entered, and the door would be closed, leaving the awestruck youngsters standing without. They could only dimly surmise the dread proceedings within. Presently the recipient of the beating would arrive, and enter also. After that no more was known to outsiders until some of the neighbours down the village street would be roused at midnight by thundering knocks at their house doors. They were caused by that idol in the constable's pocket, as he swayed to and fro, hugging the shore, or rather the door frames, closely, on his homeward way, his tall hat on the back of his head, whilst in a very reedy quavering voice he sang to the best of his ability that touching air, "The Flowers of the Forest."

There was something very conciliating in those dumpy, dark-green bottles. If disputes could be settled nowadays in the same manner, what lots of precious time and money might be saved!

A kind-hearted neighbourly man was the constable; he was never in a hurry to bring out his

idol. Once, when he was called out, he asked, "Are they fightin'?"

"Yes," was the reply, "as hard as they kin go it."

"Ah, well, one or the other on 'em will soon hev their whack; you run back an' tell how I'm comin' as soon as ever I git my staff." He took care to wait till the two had cleared off, for he was philosophical as well as kind-hearted.

Some distance from Philip Magnier's homestead, on the edge of the marshes, close to the highroad, there used to be a small but very substantially built farmhouse, on rising ground, surrounded by barns and other outbuildings. Sheltered from the winds, a little lower down, was a small orchard well stocked with fruit-trees, which were old like the buildings, and like them covered with moss and lichens. Ponds of fresh water stood round about. Apart from the other buildings was one capable of holding about fifty people. It was Old Grab's chapel, or as the folks called it, his preaching shop. He said "it was a long way for 'em to get to a church, and he had a notion it warn't right for folks to live and die like heathen;" so he built this at his own cost, and then he preached to them himself, giving it them strong and warm, as they said. They said too that he drank enough smuggled brandy "fur ter scald a hog, and yet he

preached about renderin' Cæsar his doos, and the sinfulness of gettin' drunk, in a way to make yer cry."

One of his neighbours talking of him one day, said in a mysterious whisper—for he was much feared by those round—"Folks say his psalm-singing crew help him, but I can't say for sure. I ain't helped him; but that there house is bigger inside than what it is out, and his hosses has been found all of a sweat of a morning, and that tired! He said they was hag-ridden; and that spirits moved on the earth, a lot of 'em, and strong 'uns too. He's preached to his crew about the Witch of Endor, after his hosses has been hag-rode, enough to make yer shake in yer shoes."

Twenty years later Den stood on the same spot, but the buildings were empty. Apparently they had been deserted for some time. The casements had been blown to pieces, only the iron frames were left hanging. Before the door tufts of rushes had sprung up between the flags of the roughly paved path, and small pools were here and there. Most of the old trees in the orchard were prone on the ground, not dead, for their roots were not exposed, but sloped down by the wind. The reed-thatching was blown off or rotten; from a pool that used to supply the house with drinking-water some wild ducks flew up, and one could see, by

the tracks on the surface of the reed-covered cattle-pond, that wild-fowl made it one of their feeding-spots.

It was a dull evening in late autumn, and the sun had gone down, leaving a weird kind of after-glow behind. Den felt chill and uncomfortable, so he made for the road again, where he soon overtook an old man, bent with hard work in the fields.

"Can you tell me anything about the deserted place back yonder?" asked Denzil, adding that he had known it many years ago.

"That I just ken," he said, shaking his head in a mournful way. "I lived in that there house 'leven year. I was head carter to him as owned it. Ye see that 'ere chimbley? Ain't it a big 'un? Many a time hev I been up thear. Ah! there's hidden places in that 'ere chimbley as no man could think on. 'Tis a powerful strong-built place; all the wood is oak; them big beams that runs across the ceilin' have got box places like in 'em, fur them as knows where to look fur 'em. We all had notice giv' us; fur they said the old gentleman was a-goin' to his son in furrin parts. But he never did, for he died queer"—the marsh term for a suicide. "Some of us—I was one on 'em—hed ter pint out the hidin'-places; they made us do it, they was so masterful-like, and I see a pair

o' pistols stickin' out o' one o' their pockets. Well, we showed 'em, an' then they said as we could go."

"And where is the chapel he used to preach in?"

"It was pulled down long ago. Seems like ye knowed a lot about the place, mister."

Yes, Den could have told about the whole crew and their hag-ridden hosses and long fishing-lines.

One morning after a storm a skiff was found on the beach, bottom upwards. Beside it was a sack full of rabbits that had been washed up by the tide. All about were traces of prowlers. That daring old skipper, Winder Bill, or, as he was more commonly called, Winder, said, "He reckoned it had been a rough trip, and an ill-payin' one fur all consarned in it." When it was safe to do so, the two that had formed the crew of that skiff told their tale to Winder, and a queer one it was.

No one knew whence Winder Bill had drifted to the north Kent shore. He was uncle to Den's friend Winder. The whole family had received that nickname because the head of it had been an adept in beaching a fishing-boat—in winding it up on the shore. He was a short thick-set man of great strength, broad-chested, and one of the best at handling a vessel along the coast. For swimming and diving there was not his equal.

He knew where the fowl gathered and how to sail to them; so his services were in frequent request. His voice sounded like the growl of a Newfoundland dog, and he was noted for strong salt-water language, more pointed than refined. Strong likes and dislikes he showed, and there were some whom he never would allow aboard his craft. "A fool aboard is a bad cargo," he would say. Most of his friends were such as could keep their tongues quiet and "themselves to themselves." Places to which most men gave a wide berth he liked to visit. The fowl had a knack of gathering in these lone spots, and he knew it; and he and the boy Denzil often went there together, in spite of prophetic warnings that they would be found dead in the marshes some day.

One lonely wave-washed place, difficult to get at from the main shore, and not easy to reach in a boat, was their favourite spot for watching the birds. They never carried a gun then, for both hands were needed in the boat. It was a bank, very nearly an island, flat and covered with sand, shingle, and the only coarse, wiry, stunted vegetation that can live there. On one side of it was the open sea, on the other creeks, gullies, and dykes; then, stretching away in the distance, the wild marshes. On that spit of sand two long poles, old masts of fishing-boats, were planted for

sea-marks. On one a broken fishing-basket was lashed; to the top of the other a length of old fishing-net. There they stood, mournful-looking objects, fully in keeping with all their surroundings.

The first time Denzil went to that place the equinoctials were blowing; the clouds to seaward were heavy, but not threatening, when he reached it. It was high tide, and the water lively, though not to his idea dangerously so. The waves reached up, lapping the edge of the spit. He was so intent on the motions of the birds and their cries, that he did not look out to sea for some time. When at last he did so, Den saw a sight that made his heart jump to his mouth, and he ran for his life. A great breaker was coming up full speed; it broke, reaching nearly to his feet. Fortunately he had not far to run before reaching safety, for the next wave covered the spit, and then the waters rushed and roared over the spot where Den had stood, and into the creek beyond. Sea and sky looked all one colour; the few vessels in sight rose and fell with the waters, sometimes visible on the high crest of a wave, then again lost to sight in a trough below, only their flags on the masts to be seen. As to the poles fixed and secured on the spit of sand, they swayed with the rush of water. The length of fishing-net streamed out like a pennant while the old basket wriggled to and fro wildly

They answered their purpose well on that dangerous bank.

Denzil had been told that a few black terns visited the spit, and that shelducks—sheldrakes—nested in the rabbit-holes on a high part of the spit which the tide did not reach. At the proper time he paid another visit there; a long trâmp it was, full nine miles. If you went in a boat it was farther, because of the windings of the creeks and arms of the sea before you reached the open water. Whilst he was there a small boat ran in.

"What cheer, my lad, what cheer?" It was Winder Bill. "Come aboard, my son; 'tis a long tramp fur ye. I be goin' right back to harbour. Come aboard."

It was a sail to be remembered. For thirteen miles they made their way through the haunts of the fowl. The tide was on the ebb, so they kept mid-channel. On each side, on the ooze, the birds were feeding and paddling; all kinds that kept the shores were there.

"Ye see, my son, there's more fowl to be seen from a boat than on shore; but what a chap ye are fur cruisin' in rum places."

After that, as a special mark of his favour and goodwill, he often invited Den to bear him company with his "scribblin' book," as he called it, and to "hev a day on it."

One day when the lad was about half-way thither, Bill's boat ran round a bend of the creek. "Come aboard, my son, 'tis plain sailin' to-day."

They reached the spit, the little craft was moored, and they landed. It was a splendid day, the place looked bright and even gay for that locality. As they sat there smoking and yarning, a Revenue cutter dashed round a point and came at full speed towards their landing-place.

"Ah, my lad," said Winder, "a pretty sight, ain't it? The pretty cretur walks it as though she was alive."

Two of the crew landed. Winder Bill saluted, man-of-war fashion, saying, "Good arternoon, gen'lemen." They were on No-man's Land, and not trespassing on any Crown lands. At a signal a third appeared, and they patrolled the sand-pit in all directions, and then went down to the shore, where they looked intently at the little craft.

"Bide here, my lad," muttered Bill, and down he went towards them. Soon Den saw the excise officers get on board their cutter again, and stand out to sea.

When Bill rejoined Denzil he sat for some time silently puffing great clouds of smoke from his pipe; then he spoke. "If ever a chowter-headed son of a sea-cook was glad to see the small wake of a craft at a distance, I be that: not fur my own sake, but because ye be with me. What whisper

has reached 'em now? It is here, on the spit," he said close in Den's ear, "and here it must lie for a time; 'tis in the old shelduck's burrow. We'll make sail from this port now. There's a trifle there will please ye, my lad." It reached Den later on.

When Winder Bill yarned, he never spun "cuffers"; in his wide experience he had seen strange things enough. They sounded wild to some of the mud-nozzlers, as the stay-at-home ones were called in the marshes; but later experience confirmed all he told.

Rough-voiced, large-hearted Bill passed away before Den left Longshore. He never could say much on the subject of this old smuggling friend; it moved him always.

"My cruise is nearly over," the old skipper had said with difficulty, as his end drew near. "Bless your kind hearts, my lads; don't grieve. it hurts me."

Soon his mind began to wander; he was far away, living over again a part of his past life, and his voice rang out wildly—

"Rake her fore and aft! Boarders—away there! —away!" Then came a pause. The next time he spoke it was in calm sensible tones.

"I've had—a long cruise—it is—over. I've got to anchor. Good-bye—dear lads!—all's well!"

property, or any rate free to all; but what was on the marshlands in the way of fin, fur, or feather, belonged to those who owned them.

There was one marketable commodity there in vast quantities in the proper seasons. Mushrooms grew fine and large on the grazing lands. If you were caught in the act of taking them, the matter was very simply settled: either you received a right good thrashing, or you gave one to some one else. Each took the law so far as it was possible into his own hands. This system was found to work well; it did not run you into needless law expenses. Occasionally after having, as the folks said, "knocked each other into cocked-hats," and honour being satisfied, the trespassers, or the owner and the offender, would repair together to the one bare bleak inn on the foreshore and wash down any remaining ill-feeling in a tumbler of ague medicine. Having done that, they often returned, both parties, to the contested or forbidden ground again, or an invitation to come at some future time was freely given.

In Baulk's case extreme measures were rarely resorted to, for with his long ash leaping-pole, having a circular piece fixed at its bottom, he would leap and clear all the dykes that came in his way, followed only by as many and as hearty curses as were bestowed on that naughty little

jackdaw of Rheims. Flighter, Spring-heel-Jack, the Kangaroo, were the titles given him. Neither curses nor nicknames had any effect on Baulk. He took toll from man and beast, each in its season—hares, rabbits, fish, and wild-fowl, and mushrooms too. His speech was slow and drawling, in curious contradiction to his movements. "Ef sich things hed bin made an' growed fur pertickler people, they'd oughter hev their names on or about 'em sumwheres," he was wont to remark.

Baulk was a very prince of marsh-trotters, and a lover of all wild creatures; in fact he lived with them entirely, one might say. With him Den roamed over the flats for whole days in succession. His graphic anecdotes about the marsh folks were something to be remembered. He took life as he found it, in a merry, happy-go-lucky fashion. A son of one of the graziers—Ned—was a great favourite of his and of Den's. "Master Ned has been good to me many a time when I was run hard aground," he would say to Den. "He give me this 'ere shootin' suit. He said it was old, an' he reckoned it warn't up to much. Why, bless ye, it seems to me to be brand span new, an' fits me as ef I'd been measured fur it."

To women and children, as well as to birds and animals, Baulk was gentle and considerate; but

when he was affronted by one of his own sex, the less there was in his way the better it was for all. Baulk's greatest pride were Master Ned's greyhounds, for he had trained them; and he had broken in Ned's pointers too. Some of the farmers had men up from the fens of Lincolnshire and Cambridge, — "amphibious nondescripts" these were called by would-be wits amongst the other graziers. These men were always much disliked on the flats; they brought strange ways with them, such as were not approved of by the marsh folks.

One morning Baulk was giving Master Ned's long-dogs a spin after a hare. She cleared the dykes and entered a farmer's marsh, near to where two of the strange "lookers" had their beats. Clearing the dyke with his leaping-pole, Baulk followed his dogs, and they killed in the marsh. Whilst he stood there caressing his dogs, the hare in his hands, the men came up and demanded it from him, threatening at the same time to kill the dogs.

Then was the time to see the gentle Baulk transformed—Baulk who never killed a worm without reason. The low pleasant voice the women found it so agreeable to listen to—and they must be allowed some judgment in certain matters—became hoarse with passion, and he fairly roared. Stamping the round piece of wood off the end of his ash

leaping-pole, he grasped it in the middle, his eyes flashing fire.

"Ye pair o' web-footed mud-nozzlers, thet's hed tu leave yer own drowned land because ye hadn't got the sense tu swim! You'll hurt the dogs! I'll squash ye!" And swinging his pole in a dangerous fashion, he made for the strangers, a dog on either side of him first, and then both a little in front, showing their teeth, all ready for the fray. The Lincolnshire men fled; and it was well they did, for Baulk, not being likely to control himself when opposed, was still less likely to keep his dogs in check, either of which could have coursed and pulled down a stag unwounded.

All the way home he was in a state of great excitement, now and again giving vent to his feelings in words addressed to the dogs. "Hurt ye, would they? I'd ha' died first. I'd never ha' looked Master Ned in the face agin if a hair o' yer heads hed been hurt."

I believe that was the last occasion on which Baulk's temper burst its bounds; repeated attacks of fever and ague finished the poor fellow a little later on, to Denzil's sorrow as well as that of others.

In the summer-time, when the reed warblers came to build their nests, it was a continual chatter in the marshes day and night. The sedge

birds built near at hand in the swamp, on the other side of the wall which separated Den's friend's orchard from the open marshes. If the lads thought the birds were not sufficiently lively, they would throw stones in the reeds and make a plash in the water. That would start them again in fine style.

Round the edge of the pond the wild-fowl frequented most, wild celery grew in profusion. Baulk told Den the fowl loved that plant, and he often saw feathers about the place, which confirmed the statement.

Many a fine bird that had never been shot or its plumage injured would Den see in his shooter friend's hands from time to time. When the fowl came off the water to feed on the wild celery, whilst all good people were asleep, by some means or other Baulk enticed many of them into his own safe-keeping. Clever he was in all relating to the creatures of the flats. Den used to watch him on the saltings after curlews, with his dog Nettle, a long-bodied animal about the size of a fox, with ears well pricked up and a bushy fox-like tail. Like a fox too, Net was brownish-red in colour all over.

Nettle knew his work as well as his master did. Cautiously looking over the flats, Baulk would watch for the curlews flitting up and over the

slub, and when he thought it was near enough for his purpose, he would make a sign to the dog. Away would slip Nettle, but without the least hurry, into the sea-blite and the bents, on his way to the birds. As soon as he was in the right place for it, he would show himself, a little bit at a time, his tail wagging in the herbage. Then he would crouch for a while out of sight. Directly the curlews saw him they would gather round him, shrieking their loudest. Then was the time to show his tactics. He would first slink away, as if frightened, towards his master, who lay stretched out behind the sea-wall. The din comes nearer, the gun is cocked, the birds are in a bunch overhead. Bang goes the good old single; one bird drops dead, another drops on the slub and wails. This is the one Nettle rushes for at top speed, and he brings it to his master.

Poor Nettle met with a sad end; he was run over by a cart, a very heavy one, and it killed him. The very last time Den saw Baulk, the shore-shooter said at once, mournfully, "Poor old Net!"

Our friend Denzil was much given to extremes in his ways and his behaviour. At times he would be the very life of the little band of scapegraces,—"scapegoats" some of their parents called them, with more justice, at times, than they were aware of,—whose company he delighted in; and none

would be so full of jokes and yarns as himself. But Scoot complained that after these short outbreaks "you could not get a word out of him, noways, for a week or two; he'd clew right up."

With his tame birds that he managed to keep in some spot or other—his feathered friends and companions—he was a different being. All their wants were anticipated; he watched them night and day, and talked to them, the lads said, in their own language. It was certain they understood him. One large brown owl he had which followed him about like a dog, and watched for his coming, yelling at times like a feathered demon if Den remained away too long. In the dusk of the evening he used to walk about with his wise-looking companion perched on his arm, free and unfettered, without one feather in his fine wings missing.

The boy had his faults, like all other boys, but he was never known to mock at sacred things or at any true professor of religion. When he grew older he used to say no true naturalist ever could fail to see and reverence God in His works. Like most other healthy lads, he got into mischief at times, and as inevitably he got what the marsh folks called his "quiltin'." He loved Baulk dearly, and would follow him wherever he could.

Winkle Joe was another of his friends; a pale-faced boy, who shuffled along, generally carrying

his "winkle" basket, with poor ragged clothing, which seemed hardly to keep his skin and bones together when he reached the bare "winkle hards" three miles away, over which the bitter, cutting east winds blew, sending the curlews wailing and shrieking over the weed-strewn slub. Occasionally, as he passed along, a fisher lass would call to him from the opposite side of the street, and bid him come over and share her meal, tears standing in the impulsive girl's fine eyes at the sight of his woe-begone figure. He always had a grateful word of thanks before he shuffled farther.

When the tides permitted, Joe picked winkles off the ooze, or hards, that fringed the whole length of the marshlands at ebb-tide. Many a bit of clothing was spared for him by the poor as well as the better-off class, and shoes to keep his feet from frostbite in the bitter weather; in the summer he always went barefoot. He found a sure sale for his winkles after he had boiled them, for they were of the finest—he knew just where to paddle for them. "Pennywink, wink, O!"

"Pennywink!" from old Joe always brought some one or other to the door for a pint of winkles. Sometimes he found them spread, comparatively speaking, thickly on the ooze; at others, especially in cold weather, they lay thinly. If I wished to punish my worst enemy, I would send him to pick

a gallon of winkles off the ooze when a nor'-easter was blowing full force up the creek. I once tried to pick a pint myself when out shooting, and I never repeated the job. Use is, however, second nature—or is said to be; and poor Joe's mother being a widow, and he her only child, he worked at it bravely; and that small trade was entirely in his own hands, for every one knew it would have been useless to start an opposition business in winkles—no one would have patronised any but Joe.

When well on to the flats, a watchful, half-frightened look was apt to come into the lad's face, as though he expected to hear or see something he did not altogether like.

One morning out of many let me describe. He reaches the hards, the tide being at low ebb, and begins his picking—dreary work at any time, but fearfully trying in the winter months. He picks close to the edge of the water—in fact, his feet are often in it. Judging from the length of time he stays in one spot, and his crouching position, he must have nearly filled his basket: the winkles are thickly spread on the hard just there.

Round a bend of the creek a shot is heard, and a man comes in sight with some sea-birds in his hand. He nears the ragged figure busy at his winkle-picking, gives a keen look down into the water where the winkler had been so busy, and

then passes on over the hards, and is soon out of sight. The boy, after one long look downwards again, slings his basket over his shoulders and shuffles away.

Surely that was a line, just discernible, low down in the water. What might have been attached to that line is not for us to say; nor can we tell if in the dark later on that line was grappled for from some vessel or shore-shooter's skiff. What connection there was between the man who fired the shot and the woe-begone-looking winkler, it is not for us to relate. We only know that, two days later, there was plenty of ague medicine in the houses on the flats. They said "a fresh lot hed bin sent 'em—most wondrous strengthenin' stuff—just when they wus nearly run out of it."

None but those who have tried it know what dirty and dangerous work it is to get at a good mussel-scalp, or to go after shell-fish of any kind in the old-fashioned days. The finest mussels were as a rule in the most dangerous part of the ooze. As to clams, they were worse to get at than mussels. You had to go into the gullies up to your waist in foul ooze and water, and to dig them out of the banks like potatoes.

This is all changed now, and shell-fish are cultivated on scientific principles.

CHAPTER XIV.

ON CRONES AND CORPSE-LIGHTS.

THE bird-life on the flats and along the shore did not engross the whole of Den's spare time. For weeks together he was hardly seen there, and old Nance, "worrited to death," as she often said, by those "owdacious young varmints," would actually get anxious about the boy, and hope no harm had come to him.

But the lads had other hunting-grounds to run over. There were the sluices to inspect, the wharves to visit, and the tidal mills, besides the big quay with its shipping. Old Nance said it was a wonder the boys were not drowned twenty times in a week. Nance's tongue ran away with her at times. They certainly had some narrow escapes. Occasionally they might be seen on the top of the sluice-gates with one of the miller's sons, fishing for flounders with hook and line, Scoot

A

would say, many a stiffish breeze to spring up in the family interior. The flounder flourishes best where the fresh water and the salt meet, at the mouth of some tidal creek, when the tide is low. There he lies in about a foot of clear water, his body exposed, but his head and goggle eyes buried in the sand. He is very quick in his movements when startled, and shoots off like a flash.

The method in favour was as follows: the spearer walked gently up-stream with his long stick and fork in hand, making many a rapid stroke, but not always a sure one. Sometimes the fork would come down with force on a stone, bending or breaking the prongs. When this was replaced very quietly in the family box and brought out again at dinner-time, Scoot said he had to clear out of harbour pretty quick if he didn't want to be scuttled at his berth.

Like the sea-gulls, the boys were here to-day and there to-morrow, and when they were quietest they were sure to be up to some mischief or other. In "fork borrerin' and larrupin' doors o' nights," or badgering old Snoove the blacksmith at his smithy door, they found ample employment for their active young brains and hands. Sometimes they persuaded the fishermen to take them some distance down the creek and along shore, and then to put them on land at some desirable point,

from which they made their way across marsh and flat to their own homes again. From the Reculvers and the Romney marshes, up to where the Thames and the Medway meet the tide, they knew that shore, and all its wild stories, and the ghostly traditions of the flats; the treacherous rotten swamp, where, it was said, the souls of those who had been drowned at sea came to get their corpse-lights, and to hunt for a spot of dry ground, where they indicated to the living they wished their bones to be laid when they happened to be washed on shore. If only the smallest bit of bone could be found, and Christian burial be given it, they believed the ghost would be laid.

It was small wonder if the fishing folk, holding the gloomy and stern religious views they did, believed in corpse-lights and other apparitions, for even the more enlightened religious publications of the day told stories about corpse candles and tokens.

The lonely farms on the marshes had all of them some legend connected with their history—some spirit that haunted them either in the past or present: there was doubtless a grain of truth in all of them.

The high school for scandal in Marshton was when the old crones and gossips gathered together, as they did from time to time, nearly all of them

widows, in the house of one of their number who was in better circumstances than the rest — her husband having been captain and owner of a small vessel — there to drink her very best gunpowder tea. That was the occasion for "jest a leetle drop o' sumthin' beside the milk and sugar in the cups —jest a taste to mek the tea agree with yer better."

These old ladies had wonderfully tenacious memories, and the vigorous action of their tongues seemed to compensate for the loss of physical power in their limbs. One of the young fishermen used to say very disrespectfully of his mother-in-law, who was one of the liveliest of these crones, that "the old gal had the roots of her clapper fresh iled every night, so as it should go right in the mornin'. When fruit-time cum round, he'd like to let her out for a cherry-clapper in sum orchard to scare the birds."

But this, you may be very sure, was not in the hearing of the old lady. Their tongues wagged freely over that gunpowder tea; old memories were awakened—of how the husband of one had lost his life trying to save another, both, however, going down together; how another man had sprung from nothing all at once—God only knew how—getting to be rich all of a sudden. They could *guess* pretty well how it was. For the hundred and fiftieth time the favourite romance of Marshton

was told—that of Handsome Hannah and Blo'ard Ned—which deserves, however, a chapter to itself.

One notable offender received once in Den's hearing a specimen of her "bell tinker" from one of the crones at her own door, as he was passing down street. She told him of the pit whence he was drawn with a vengeance, in her shrillest tones, drawing all the neighbours to their doors to listen. The whole of his family history, chapter and verse, she recounted with much artistic effect, and wound up with some of his more recent evil deeds in a manner so effective that, as he dashed up the street and round a corner, he was heard to exclaim, "D——n that old woman!"

The man deserved it, if it was in rather bad taste. They said "it was them as hed furrin blood in 'em as did them low things mostly." By "furriners" they meant any who came to live in their midst from other counties, on whom they always looked with marked disfavour—even preferring those who came from beyond seas to these interlopers, who were like and yet unlike themselves.

A spot there was of which the crones told many a blood-curdling story, and the neighbourhood of which the lads generally shunned. One of the marsh roads ran through it, and it was the dread of all who had to drive that way. The horse or

horses, no matter how evenly and quietly they had been going up to that point, would start in terror when they reached it; and it required all their driver's strength of arm and will to control them in passing that place. They were often in a perfect sweat from terror after they had got safely past: their nostrils expanded, and their eyes as though ready to burst from their sockets. Denzil was once driving with some one that way, and saw this for himself.

The story current in the marshlands was that an awful crime had been committed there long ago, and the spirits of men who had been murdered kept guard there night and day. They said these were invisible to human eyes, but were clearly seen by the poor frightened beasts. Later on the quaking bog over which that road was made gave up its secret, but that was after Denzil had grown to manhood, and had left his marshland home for good.

We say little here about Den's everyday work, to which he had to go after a year or two of pleasant school life under the kindly old master. He worked, like his father, in his kinsman's business, or, at any rate, in a similar employment; but his working hours do not affect this history. As I said before, his father chafed and fretted because Den did not give his whole heart to the work by which

his bread was earned. He frowned anxiously at the boy as he sat drawing at night in a quiet corner; but he could not change the bent of the boy's mind, nor could he influence him during those hours of leisure, which even the sternest taskmaster must allow.

Denzil early made up his mind as to the course he intended to pursue, and nothing moved him from it. That branch of their business that fell to his lot he would master thoroughly, so that he might not be open to rebuke or censure in it. But the hours of work over, he would do as he pleased with his time; and all his nature went out to the wild life of the flats and along shore.

And so he grew up, reserved and unyielding on the one hand, yet devoted to the creatures outside, attached to the fishing folk, with whom he was bound by ties of blood on his mother's side, and related by these, as well as by the closest friendship, to his cousin Larry.

CHAPTER XV.

HARD TIMES ALONG SHORE.

WHEN the boats had come up the creek and were moored at the quay, if Den was free he would jump on board to see if there was any little curiosity for him there, in the shape of fish or bird. He rarely went home empty-handed: gulls, for instance, can be caught with hook and line far more easily than pike, and, unlike pike, at any time. He never tired of hearing the fishermen's yarns about the great savage dog-fish—the British sharks, they termed them: how the ferocious brutes snapped and fought when they were captured. As they lay in the bottom of the boats they lashed about and bit in all directions at their captors and at each other. The larger ones would fix on the men's sea-boots as they moved about the boat, or hang on to their oilskin fishing-coats like bull-dogs. The bite of a fish of their sort is not a laughing matter.

These dog-fish frequented parts of the best fishing-grounds. Some portions they avoided altogether, in other parts they abounded at certain seasons. Now and again the men would go out solely to catch dog-fish,—to clear them off a bit, they would say. At such times they caught boat-loads, and sold them somewhere farther down the coast, reserving just a few for their own and their neighbours' consumption. You could get a monster for a couple of shillings; skate also. We remember one of our friends buying a splendid skate, weighing thirty pounds, for eighteenpence, and the fisherman who sold it thought himself well paid.

Dog-fish are excellent eating; a cut out of the middle of one is considered by many as good as the best lobster ever eaten. They ought to be good, for they live themselves on soles, plaice, and flounders.

The gulls were objects of study to the boy at all times, in sunshine and in storm, from the shore as well as from the fishing-boats, when the men would take him with them, stowed away safely and snugly in the bow or stern, as the case might be, where he could see all. The actions of the birds are very different as they flap up and down along the coast-line at the different seasons, their movements being regulated by the food they are in quest

of. Wide awake they always are, but especially when the large shoals of fish make the surface of the sea ripple as they swim near the shores. The greatest portion of the fish is captured within comparatively short distance of land, though out of sight of it. Then the gulls would follow the boats as they showed in open water, gathering in one vast flock, flapping wings above, below, and alongside, clacking and screaming hoarsely. Den was happy then, watching the gulls dash down on the fish as these rippled up. When the nets were shot they continued the same sportive tactics, wheeling, flapping, and dipping in all directions about the boats. But the best time to see the real nature of the birds, from the fierce black-backed to the common gull, was when the nets were hauled. As these showed above water the gulls dashed down on the glittering captives held in the meshes, tearing, biting, and gobbling like so many feathered furies. At times, to his great joy, that prince of his tribe, the splendid great cob in his pure plumage of blue-black and white, came almost within Den's reach, flapping, and one might say barking, with his hoarse cackle, in his ferocious eagerness to pull the fish from the nets. If one dropped from the bird's bill after he had got it out, he never picked it up again, but made for another. This went on until the nets were fully hauled in. Then

the host of gulls sank down on the water, full with fish to their very gullets.

"They's hevin' a sort o' nap arter blowin' their kites out," Winder would observe on such occasions.

Nothing was done to prevent valuable fish from being taken in that fashion, partly because the birds' name was legion, and also because, as the fishermen on our part of the coast said, there was fish enough for them and the gulls too. This feeling does not extend to all lines of the coast. There are parts where the sordid fishers begrudge a paltry sprat to a poor gull; but folks were not so mean about Marshton. And yet, what with the gulls above and the dog-fish below, they suffered enough at times. The dog-fish made terrible havoc with the hauls,—with the fish in the nets and the fish on the long lines; they snapped and tore the nets as they were brought in over the boat-sides.

In some of the hard winter seasons things went badly with the fisher folk, though they bravely made the best of it. Fish they had, but little or no money; and those who advocate fish diet are men who have never been forced to live on it daily. The keen north-easters cut clean through them, as they said. Men, women, and children had a dull and weary look. They were ill with a disease

that had no pain, but that sapped all the springs of energy and joy—the want of meat. In a place where nearly all were poor there was the wish to help, but the means of doing so were small. Fish they had in abundance, but their vessels could not make for any market; there they lay at their anchors, laden with hard-frozen fish of all kinds. They were many of them left in charge of the boys, whilst their owners went to see the farmers in the adjacent districts to persuade them to purchase their catches, and use it as manure for the fields. They were glad to sell them for a mere trifle.

Although the snowfalls were heavy at times, the roads were kept open for the mail-coaches. No local boards existed, but snow-ploughs were at work in all directions—the farmers willingly sending their fine cart-horses and men to help to clear the road in their own parishes. So the waggons came and fetched the fish and placed it in the fields, on the frozen snow in heaps at set distances, ready for spreading out when the weather broke. The nearest field on which that fish-dressing was placed was more than two miles from the tide.

"The gulls and dun (hooded) crows are all on the fields after the fish," said one of Den's shore-shooter friends to the lad one morning. "That's just in your line. They're at your farm on the uplands. Will you go?"

gull of the marshes, covered the field, or rather were spread over it in small companies, all busy at the fish, apparently filled with the same idea that they had to eat as much fish as was possible in a given time. The great cobs did not confine themselves to that one field; they visited the others and came back again, but not near the hedge—they flew only over the middle part of the field. The smaller gulls did not wander, nor did they take the same precaution as their larger relatives.

So it went on from day to day. The birds left the fields for the flats as each evening drew near; each morning they brought more birds with them, and, finding that they were not molested, the whole crowd of crows and gulls grew bolder and more impudent, until the farmer noticed how much smaller his fish-heaps were growing—some of them, in fact, having nearly vanished. "Poor things!" said he, "they must be most desprit hungry—there ain't no doubt on that pint; but I raly don't see as I can afford to give 'em three waggin-loads o' fish;" and he summoned his head carter, who was a good shot, handed him the old "raker" from over the chimneypiece, gave him a flask of the best sporting powder and some duck-shot, and bade him "wake 'em up a bit." The old fellow not only waked 'em all up, but he sent a good number of them to sleep again faster

than was their wont. He got into the dry deep ditch, with a pair of old worsted stockings drawn over his boots to prevent the sound of the crunching in of the frozen snow, and fired on the birds. Some of these simply flew up from where their dead companions lay, to pitch in another part of the field, in order to attack the fish there. Then the man slipped round to that side to fire from the ditch again; and so the game went on for some time. When he picked up his birds, he had more than he could stand under. The black-backs or cobs were sold to the local bird-stuffers, the others had their wings cut off for using as dusters and hearth-sweepers. Our folks used to find the wings of water-birds very handy for those purposes. The feathers are "springy"; they were plucked off the birds next, and used for stuffing cushions, not for pillows: as I said before, they were supposed to have the property of chasing sleep away. Then the carcases were given to the farm hands; and as food was scarce that hard winter, they were glad, after burying them in the ground for a few days in order to rid them of their fishy taste, to feed their large families on them.

The last time Den visited that field during the hard frost was in the afternoon, just as the gulls were leaving it for the flats. As he watched them take flight, he saw a small cloud of birds coming

up from the coast: they were golden plovers. "That's the best thing I have seen for many a day," said an old friend who was with him, an experienced shot. "The birds are moving from the coast, and the weather is about to break." Next morning a thaw set in, and it continued, ending one of the bitterest winters known for years.

There has been a great deal of drivelling nonsense written about the unerring instinct of birds. We have seen it often at fault ourselves: birds, like human beings, get out of their reckoning at times. We have known the black geese, when the fog has hung low down over the sea, float in with the tide close to shore; and then our shore-shooters had their time, and flash after flash sounded, and the reports rolled for miles along the shore. The spaniels were busy enough then bringing the birds in: they had lost themselves in the thick curtain of fog that enveloped them. And wary though those fowl are as a rule, we have seen geese and ducks—to say nothing of the divers and gulls—floating in and out among the line of battle-ships that lay at anchor, ready to pick up anything eatable that might be thrown overboard. Many of them were caught with hook and line purposely baited for them.

Once in a blinding snowstorm that came rushing over the marshes, Den observed a flock of golden

plovers dash into one of the hedges, and six of them were captured by his companion before they could get free again. That same day the curlews came to grief. No one can say where the fowl go in the course of the night, nor where they feed, with any degree of certainty. Much that is stated on this point is mere supposition.

When the evening gun was fired off from the guardship below Marshton, the flash and report used to cause a great commotion. You could not see the fowl, but you would hear them as they rushed about and called to one another overhead.

It was a grand sight for Den, that of the fowl round about the pools and the lagoons during the glorious summer that followed that severe winter. They had never been seen about in such numbers before. Most of them had been bred in or on the marshes and flats. The king of the curlews—the thick-knee—had his haunt in the large fields, or sometimes on the upland pastures. You would see some if you had a pointer with you. Den had one occasionally as a companion in his wanderings; and the animal would point and look round, as much as to say, "Here's a curiosity." Then the lad would see as beautiful a picture of bird-life as his heart desired. First he noted a pair of large bright eyes watching himself and the dog. Then he perceived the mother-bird crouched low on the

ground with her neck stretched out, and her two chicks close beside her in the same position. The good old dog knew well that the lad was not on a shooting expedition, and he would look up in his face and then turn his head a little on one side. Presently he wants Den to look at something else: it is the cock-bird at a little distance off, all in a twit and a quiver, dreadfully anxious to be off, yet fearful to leave. "Come on, Don, old boy," the lad would say; "we have seen a pretty sight, you and I, and we will leave them in peace now."

To go back to that hard winter—how the fowl rushed to that bleak foreshore and followed the ebbing tide inch by inch as it sank! Clouds of dunlins, with sanderlings mixed with them, ran twittering and dibbling over the hards and the slub ooze. Curlews rushed backwards and forwards in all directions, shrieking and whistling; or they gathered in a mob over some lucky find. The oyster-catchers, the sea-pies, so called because of their black-and-white plumage, took part in the clatter. The black-backed gulls in pairs flapped up and down in mid-channel, out of shot, on the look-out for any fowl that might have been wounded and taken to the water: you would hear their rough cackle as one or the other reached it. If the find was a small bird, it was swallowed whole at a gulp by the first that reached it. If it happened to be

a thick seal or otter, a pair would go for it and tear it in pieces. The gulls are noble birds to look at, as they flap along on their powerful wings. It is a feather in the shooter's cap if he has outwitted a black-backed gull.

It would be useless to try and describe that host high up in the air, like a thunder-cloud driven by the wind—masses of fowl passing over morning and evening: the old shore-shooters knew by their manner of flying what each different company was. "There they go," they cried, "duck, widgeon, geese, and plovers, all on the move. 'Tis dreadful hard times up in the north, an' we shall hev it soon."

That was before the three weeks of black-frost set in. Some fowl were about, they said, that they had not seen since they were boys. Inland waters were ice-bound, and the birds that had frequented them sought the sea-shore and the salt marshes. The rooks that built in the trees arching over the road close to the old grey church, hunted in all directions for what they could get in the farmyards, and in the gardens of the farm-labourers on the edge of the marsh; and then when night fell they dropped down from their perches with a thud, frozen to death. Moor-hens, rails, and dabchicks crept into any holes they could find in the high thick hedge-banks that ran round some portions of

the flats. All cattle were, of course, housed when the hard weather first set in.

"See here, Reed-bird," cried Scoot one day, as he came running up the marshland road, "did ye ever see a crueller sight than that?"

He had part of a branch from a tree in his hands, and on it, perched side by side, two starlings in the fixed attitude of death.

"Stuffed! are they, Scoot?" asked Den in a perplexed tone.

"Stuffed! No, they be empty, empty as ken be —frozen to death. I cut them off the tree on the spray same as ye see 'em."

Grown lad though he was, Den felt a lump rise in his throat, and his voice sounded husky—

"Poor birds! let me hold 'em a bit, Scoot."

"Take 'em, an' welcome, Reed-bird; I thought maybe as ye'd like to make a pictur on 'em."

That bright little fellow, the kingfisher, suffered too, terribly. He could pick something up from the tide in the day-time, but roosting-time troubled him. Many a kingfisher was found on the stems of the reeds broken down by the snow, frozen dead. When the short day was closing, as far as the eye could see, the fowl were flying to and from the Essex to the Kentish side, and back again. Now and then you would see the heron as he flapped heavily along, and hear him giving vent to his feel-

ings in a rough chatter, like the quack of a duck and the chatter of a jackdaw blended together. He has another cry not even as pleasant as that—you might hear it if you had spoilt his fishing for him: a hoarse scream it is, one by no means agreeable to hear at night.

The shore-shooters had a rough time of it then, for a perishing winter makes the fowl poor. No punt-guns were used in that district, the men shot from the fishing-boats and the skiffs. After a time the ice floated up the creek from the sea in great masses, crunching and grinding against the sides of the fishing-boats anchored there. The bottom of that particular part was covered with shell-fish, principally mussels, in all stages of growth, from little ones the size of your thumb-nail to the full-sized ones. Cockles there were too, but in small numbers comparatively. A fine sea-weed grew round the stones, and there was ribbon or goose grass in plenty. To this spot, floating up with the tide, came the black-ducks, scoters, diving for shell-fish, and golden-eyes, magpie-divers, for the same, only smaller food. Pochards too and dun-birds gathered there. All these dive for their food in the open water, but in hard weather it exhausts them to dive to a great depth, and then be knocked about by the heavy waves when they rise again. Besides that, the water is thick with sand and mud

that has been stirred up from the bottom. And so the birds seek the shelter of the creeks and bays. All that the shooters could do then was to admire them from a distance.

Den went with that company of men at times. Each pair of shooters would have a certain beat. Six or eight might start out from one place together, but directly the flats were reached, different directions were taken, a mile or two apart. This was a rule strictly followed by the shore-shooters. On one of these occasions, when the fowl made for the creek from the open water, those who were on the lower stands made their way higher up. The consequence was, all the men got together, and they agreed then, with one voice, to "give it up as a bad job." Under the lee of a boat that had been hauled up they watched the fowl; so did the dogs. The animals just looked, and whimpered; not one of them retrieved a fowl that day. Den was the only one of the party who really enjoyed himself; to him it was intensely interesting to see the birds diving and swimming about, with the ice all round them. They were close in, but not close enough even for a duck-gun. The skiffs belonging to the boats had been drawn up out of harm's way. Just as the party were going to start away, a fine scoter came near shore in his diving operations. That was more than one man could put up with: taking

a steady aim, he let drive. When the smoke cleared away, there was the scoter a little farther down, as busy as ever: he had ducked the flash. A man may consider himself very fortunate if he gets a scoter at the first shot when he is diving.

Where a large quantity of salt-water herbage flourishes, it is surprising how many that are, comparatively speaking, inland birds seek the shore. Woodcocks, snipe, wild-ducks, moór-hens, coots, teal, skylarks in great flocks, dabchicks, come to all the tide-pools. Kingfishers are very common; of thrushes, redwings, and fieldfares there will be a few, and the herons are sure to come. The tide leaves something for all, if the poor birds are not too weak to get it. A long length of fishing-net will then bag a vast number of all sorts, if used rightly; and the sons of the coast-guards with whom Den associated could use them to perfection. He was a happy youth, though often straitened in his own home, owing to his parents' stern, religious prejudices, and their not over-ample means; but his knowledge of the fowl—and, indeed, of all outdoor life—and his readiness and reputation for pluck where danger was concerned, made him a rare favourite with both fishers and fowlers; and so there was always a place for him amongst them, and a gun or fishing-line whenever he wanted it. That winter there

was too much that interested him in the ways of the wild-fowl, and the straits they were put to, for him to think of sport. The coast being a flat one, the water was often frozen before it could properly ebb off the ooze; there was a glittering sheet of ice spread for miles, which covered the sea-grass and other marine productions. The next tide or tides made matters worse, for the sheet of ice beneath the water was not melted at the flow, but got much thicker with the ebb of the tide, binding fast all below it. This was not of so much moment as long as the fowl could keep to the open sea, for the waves did not let the ice form on the beach, and they found a great quantity of floating grass that had been torn up from the different grass-beds and borne out seawards. They did not mind the water being moderately rough either, for the fowl rise up and down like so many corks. At such times the waders keep the beach-line as much as they possibly can. But all this is altered when the storms come howling over the waste of waters; then they must find shelter, or be dashed on the shore. They know when the storm is brewing in good time, generally; and, before it bursts, seek safety in the creeks. That was Den's time for observation. The ice broke up on the ooze after a few fierce tides, the outcome of the storm, had rushed up, and the masses whirled,

crashed, and ground in all directions. It was fearful weather, but the diving-ducks must have food if they can possibly get it; and there the lad watched them diving and coming to the surface again between the blocks of floating ice. The birds got poor after a week or two of rough weather, and were then of very little use either as specimens for the bird-preserver or to eat. Their plumage looked water-washed and draggled.

One might think it impossible for water-fowl to get drowned, especially the divers, and yet they frequently are; for when they are floating ten, fifteen, or twenty miles out at sea, and the storm bursts on them in all its fury before they can reach a lee shore, they get dashed down on the waves as if they were so many gnats instead of strong, swift-winged birds; and they are killed by the blows they receive from the waves they have been wont to ride over in such joyous confidence. More than that, they are unable to keep their plumage in its proper condition, and, in spite of the old saw about water running off a duck's back, they soon get wet through, and so drown in the most miserable manner. Then they are washed on shore, to become the prey of all the gulls and hooded crows about the place. The winged scavengers of the coast-line seem to gather together over such spoil in an in-

credibly quick fashion; it does not lie long on the shore. Many, in fact, get torn in pieces by the huge dog-fish as they float in.

It was a blessed relief to man and bird and beast when that hard winter gave way to the gentler gales that ushered in the spring.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BAILIFFS OF THE MARSHLANDS.

In the days of Denzil's youth the marshlands were the home—the breeding-place—of fever and ague. Those scourges of the flats visited the dwellers constantly, more or less severely according to the seasons. Sometimes, after a spell of hot weather, the wind would change to a colder quarter and send the thick mists rolling over the flats charged with all the dread exhalations of the swamps. Then, not only did the dwellers on the marshes suffer, but the inhabitants of the fishing villages as well. A thick cold mist enveloped all the district.

One evening Den came home from an expedition with the fishers that had lasted for some days, and he found father, mother, and two brothers all down with fever and ague. The next day he was stricken himself, and the whole family lay helpless. The news soon reached the fishing quarter that the fever

was of a more dangerous sort than ordinary, and that the doctor said the patients would need careful watching and nursing to give them a chance for life. Many were the comments, in no measured language, on the obstinacy and heartlessness of those relatives at the big house up street, whose duty it was to forget and dismiss all ill-feeling, and to come and minister to the needs of the family on the marsh. Laurence longed to go to his friend's aid, but he was not suffered to do so; and when the mother's people saw it was hopeless to expect help from that quarter, they volunteered freely, both the young and older women relieving each other constantly as nurses. What a dreary painful time that was! For a number of weeks the whole family lay helpless, hovering between life and death, racked with pain, longing at night that it might be morning; and when the day came, wishing night was there once more.

Scoot and Winder were away with their fathers at the fishing at the time Den fell ill. As soon as they got into harbour, before they had time to hear the news, they ran down to "hail Reed-bird."

"It du seem too onnatural quiet," remarked Winder when they had reached the fever-stricken place; and, seeing all closed and no stir of life, had strolled about a little.

"I'll just give him a bit o' a hail," said Scoot.

Before his hail, which was by no means a weak one, could be repeated, the house door was opened, and one of their own fisher lasses beckoned to them without a word.

As soon as they were within speaking distance, she bade them stop where they were and not come nearer.

"What's in the wind, Polly? Whativer's brought you up here?" asked Winder.

"Denzil an' all his people is near dyin' with the fever: I've cum tu take my spell o' the nursin'. Don't ye cum no farther, it ain't safe; 'tis a catchin' fever. An' don't ye speak above yer breath fur tu disturb 'em."

In spite of Polly's injunctions, the faithful friends at once walked up to the door.

"We ain't afeard o' no fever, Polly," said Scoot. "How long has this bad job been on? Do ye think, Polly, as we could just see him an' cheer him up a bit? Ain't he talked about us? Just let us hev one glimp' like. We'll take our shoes off an' creep up like mice."

"No," said Polly, decisively; "I've had 'em all given in my charge, an' I don't let no one in, not even fur a glimp'. Go away and let me shut the door."

"What ken he eat, Polly?" persisted Scoot. "Winder an' me 'll git him any mortal thing as

he fancies. They'd give us anythin' fur him as they have in the boats."

"Eat? they're all too near death's door for eatin'," replied Polly.

"Don't ye let him slip through your fingers, Polly," whispered Winder, in an awe-stricken voice.

Polly closed the door and bolted it, and the two lads walked mournfully away; but many a choice bit of fish, all "trimmed ready for cookin'," as they said, was taken to that door day after day, with other morsels that they judged were likely to tempt their friend.

It was many weeks before they were allowed to see their companion—weary weeks of restlessness and suffering to Den, and of great anxiety, added to the bodily pain of his parents. From the big house of the Portreeve no help came, although many a loving message was sent by Larry through Scoot and Winder. How strangely unforgiving, and uncompromisingly hard relatives can be in their quarrels with one another; the nearer the tie of nature has been, the harder it seems to unite two ends when once severed. Time works wonders, however, and by degrees all looked much as before at the house on the marsh. The young ones, at any rate, soon began to gain ground again. Den had suffered most of the three lads.

One day when Scoot and Winder went up to inquire as usual after their playfellow, they found what seemed to them a perfect wreck of his former self, seated, propped up with pillows, in a great chair by the fire. They tried to smile as they walked up to him, but failed in the effort.

"Sit down aside 'o me," he whispered, and the two did as he bade them, each taking one of his poor, thin, little hands—Den's hands never were large, but now they were mere shadows it seemed to the fisher lads—in their own strong brown ones. They found nothing to talk about, and could only stroke those thin hands and look at each other. There was no necessity for Polly's injunction that they should not excite her patient with their yarns.

Presently Scoot beckoned to her — "We're goin'," he said, in a choked sort of voice; he could hardly say good-bye.

For a few minutes after leaving the lads were silent, then Scoot remarked that "Ef he'd stopped in thet house another minnit, he'd hev cried like a kitten."

"Ef it hadn't bin fur upsettin' Denzil, I'd hev fairly yelped," said Winder; "as 'twas, it nigh choked me, swallerin' of it down."

Is there any friendship in after-life so strong and disinterested, I wonder, as that of true, honest, young hearts of the same sex for each other?

Those two rough, sturdy fisher lads were as one all the days of their youth, and Denzil was their beau-ideal of all that was clever, and at the same time companionable. For him either lad would have done anything in their small world.

When at last the house was clear of fever, and Den was allowed to go out for the first time, he begged to be taken down to see the people in the fishing quarter. To his joy this request was not only granted, but he was told that he should stay there for change of air, as long as they could do with him.

Poor Den! he was so weak, that when Scoot and Winder had helped in carrying him down, the excitement was too much for him; as his friends crowded round to give him welcome, the tears rolled down his wan cheeks.

"Jest ye let him git into dock at once, my boys," said one; "his timbers is weak, an' he'll soon spring a leak again. Git him berthed, an' then ye ken talk to him."

"An' when ye're berthed, Den," said Winder, "Scoot an' me's goin' tu hev a reg'lar flare-up."

The way they celebrated their thanksgiving over their friend's recovery, and relieved their own feelings, was this. First they "larruped" all the doors in the long village street that could be got at safely as well as effectively, then they hollered,

"Snoove! Snoovey! Snoovey! — Snoove!" until the old blacksmith rushed out of his shop, with a hot iron in his hand, and brandished it wildly. Then they roused up old Nance, and made the poor soul's hair stand on end. And all this, they said, was just to show how glad they were that Denzil had got about again.

"'Tis a right down pity as ye hadn't hed a touch of the fever yerselves, ye howlin' young shrimpgrigs, to quieten ye a bit," screamed Nance.

The house Den was taken to belonged to his mother's people. It had been built a couple of hundred years before by some of the foreign traders that had settled in Marshton. Quite a mansion it was, in the Dutch style. The large courtyard was paved with flagstones; at one corner of it a spring of pure water supplied a big stone cistern, and the stream flowed from there to the tideway. The spacious kitchen was also paved. The owners of the house at one period of its history had been lobster merchants. At that time the market supply and demand for that shell-fish was very limited compared with what it is now. The fish comes in from many quarters at the present day. Norway supplied the market then, and these people imported them. Here the great boiling-coppers stood, under the gear for lowering the large baskets of fish into them. Directly the lobsters were

brought to the right condition they were sluiced with cold water, and then laid out all over the paved courtyard to get properly cold.

From a door in the yard you passed to the stables and cowhouses, and beyond these was a large garden well stocked with all kinds of fruit-trees and vegetables. From this garden a path led to one of the largest orchards in North Kent. This, of all places about Marshton, was the spot where the invalid lad might regain his wonted health and vigour.

On the garden side of the house, parted from it only by a low wall, was the pond belonging to the old mill close at hand. Here moor-hens croaked and clicked, and dabchicks dived all the day long; the scene being varied by the flight of wild-duck or the spring of snipe.

As to the house itself, it was spacious and airy. The rooms were lofty, and panelled from skirting to ceiling, like the rest of those substantial old dwellings in the marshlands. Where the oak was not left in its natural state, the panelling had been painted. It was built to stand the wear and tear of many generations. There were innumerable large cupboards with circular tops and folding-doors let into the massive walls. Even the roomy attic floor was supplied with them. Some of the attic rooms Den knew as a boy were as large and far more convenient than many of the drawing-

rooms of the present day. From one of these, in that old Dutch house, a step-ladder, permanently fixed, led out on the leads to a flat place about six feet square. Right in front of this rose a massive stack of chimneys. No one outside, down below, would have suspected the existence of that square "coigne of vantage."

Now on the flat side the edges of the chimney-stack had been splayed off, or bevelled, leaving a space of about a foot as a point for observation between the chimney-stack and the roof that rose on either side of it. The men who built that mansion knew well what they were about. From the flat square of leads those two bevelled-out spaces gave the looker-out a complete survey seawards and landwards. Securely screened from view, as it was the highest house in the district, gazing seawards, he overlooked, first, the long street leading down to the flushing sluice. Beyond the street stood the quays, the warehouses, and farther on the shipping. Past these his eye lighted on the sea-wall, the creek, and the marshes, with the Isle of Sheppy and the open sea in the distance. Any boat coming up the creek from open water was visible to him, and a signal given could be distinctly understood if he used a glass; there was a rest fixed on each side of the chimney-stack for that purpose.

The view landward commanded all the roads that led into Marshton, or out of it. Nothing could be more perfect as a point of observation.

This was a delightful retreat for our invalid. Whenever the weather was congenial his friends carried him up there, and, supported by pillows, he sat for hours in his large chair, where he dozed and dreamed away the time, unless Scoot or Winder was beside him. At that height the noises of the lower world were softened, and the air was cooler and purer. His two friends were the only lads ever allowed to go up to the top of the house with him. Their respective fathers knew all the secrets of that dwelling, and the lads dared not have told anything pertaining to their parents' business transactions. They dared not have faced the penalties for so doing. Wonderful stories, however, did Scoot and Winder pour into Den's ears of what they had heard whispered by their fathers and grandfathers of scenes that had taken place, in which the space on the leads had figured significantly; of dark and stormy nights, they told, when a flash of fire had been seen to rise above and at the sides of that old chimney-stack just as the fishing-folk were going home to bed. And then, how between one and two in the morning, horses at top speed had been heard coming down the street, with the sound of round oaths and

pistol-shots intermingled. After that a second flash had come up from the house-top, and the next moment horsemen at full tear had dashed round the house, crossed the garden, and made for the low wall of the mill-pond. Splash after splash had been heard by the miller's men who were at work inside the mill that night, before all had vanished no one knew whither. But no sooner were they out of ear-shot than other horsemen were heard coming up; and, as they turned the corner, those who had caught a glimpse of them saw that they were excise officers.

The colour would fly to Den's pale cheeks as he listened to the yarns of the older lads; and health came back to his fever-wasted frame with the sun and the breezes that played on the roof tiling and the leads of the hospitable home of his mother's kinsfolk.

CHAPTER XVII.

SOME OLD SEA-DOGS.

DEN'S sojourn in the old Dutch house, and the boys' yarns, bring us to a chapter in these truthful annals of an old-world fishing village, relating to some of the old salts of Marshton, and a romance connected with one who was for many years their foremost leader.

November had come in rough—"werry rough," the old people said. The harbour was crowded with craft—schooners, brigs, and fishing-boats—that had run in from sea when the storm was coming on. Threatenings of what was on the way had been heard for a day or two. Folks who live by the sea know well the meaning of those mysterious sounds that come from no man knows where, and pass away over the surface of the deep. The water-birds also had indicated plainly by their cries and their actions that the only safe course

was to run in for shelter on the first harbour-tide. The divers cry and wail, for they know well how they will be put about when the storm comes in all its wild fury; their fishing-banks will be mere masses of fierce, boiling quicksands. Woe betide the craft that runs on to one of these, she will soon be in a sorry plight! A vessel will strike and break up in pieces like a match-box, amid the sands in weather such as this.

The gulls had come inland in flocks, covering the marshes and fields on some of the upland farms like rooks. Great poplars bent as fishing-rods when the fierce gusts swept over the flats, tearing some of them up by the roots, and causing the lonely marsh folks, thinly scattered here and there in the more sheltered spots, to look well at their reed-thatched roofs and narrow leadlight windows. Glass being dear in those days, and many of their dwellings miles away from any town, smashed-in windows meant money, of which valuable commodity they had but little.

They said heavy weather was coming up, and told all they met on the flats whose stock was out to house them in shelter quickly. All the craft belonging to the place were safe in harbour—except the Gull, the lightest and smartest brig that ever sailed from Marshton. She floated on the water as easily as the bird she was named

after; only in one point she belied her name, for when the bird, dreading the tempest, made for the land, the craft made for the open sea, much to the wonder and consternation of some of the simpler-minded inhabitants of the fishing village. Her captain was called Blowhard Ned—or, as the folks pronounced it, "Blo'ard Ned." He was tall, lean as a greyhound and as muscular; with dark hair and keen grey eyes that saw things clearly which were dim to others.

All through the summer the Gull lay at her berth, as neat and trim as any yacht that ever spread canvas; not a thing out of order from her keel to her topmast. Old "Bandy," the rope-maker, generally had some good orders to execute for her during the bright summer weather—long ropes and short ropes, hawsers, and very long, fine lines about the thickness of a man's little finger.

A great smoker, but a small talker, was Bandy; all that his neighbours could ever draw out of him, when they were curious about the jobs he was executing for Blo'ard Ned, was, "'Tis the best kind o' stuff as ken be got fur love or money as is used on this 'ere tacklin', an' it's fur the Gull; she wants more gear."

No one made gear in the rope line for her except Bandy; but there were many other little articles required for her which were not in his way—iron-

work, for instance, of a peculiar construction, and which was made by one blacksmith only, as good a craftsman for strong, plain work as ever made anvil ring. He rejoiced in the name of Snoovey. The boys used to creep round to his smithy when it was dark and yell out "Snoovey—Snoovey—Snoove-Snoovey!" to the music of his anvil. They found immense delight in that vocal exercise, and his opinions on the subject did not trouble or deter them; they were quickly out of reach when he began to give vent to them. It was noticed, however, by those who happened to call in at his smithy just after he had been serenaded with the tune of "Snoovey - Snoove!" that his hammer would be swung about in a decidedly wild and warlike manner two or three times over his head, and his language grew as fiery as his forge. What has become of all that daring, laughing, mischief-loving crew? We can only answer for one of them to-day.

Ay, Snoovey made that ironwork for the Gull; grappling tackle, nearly all of it. Her captain said it was for catching whales and other things, if any one, a little more curious and bolder than the rest, ventured to ask what could be his use for those articles. More than once the Gull had come to her berth in very different trim from that she was in when she left it; her running-gear had been cut

or torn about, and once a curious hole was in her bows, caused no one ashore knew how. Captain Ned was silent on the subject.

The good and the bad alike have the benefit of surmisings and reports for good or for evil, as the case may be; the community at large is not generally much the wiser for them, they are most frequently wide of the mark. A strange tale found its way once to the village about a vessel like the Gull—"her very picter," it was said, only she was grey in colour, like that spectre-ship the Flying Dutchman; and she had been seen close to the Goodwins busily engaged with a valuable cargo—in other words, wrecking. But against this story there was the testimony of one that made the harbour-tide and anchored his vessel to her berth in a sad condition—mast carried away and her deck showing lots of litter. When her master stepped on shore, he went to the house of the Portreeve, and told a story to the effect that his craft, blown out of her course, had struck the edge, so to speak, of the Goodwins. That whilst he was in that sorry fix the Gull had borne down, got him off, lent him spar and gear, and then wished him good luck to port, refusing to claim one farthing salvage money for his trouble.

The tale spread: public spirit was roused into

enthusiasm in praise of their own Blo'ard Ned, who had done this as only himself could have done it. The gallant act must be recognised in some suitable way.

So when, a week later, the Gull swung to, looking as if the services of Bandy and Snoovey would be required before she went to sea again, and Captain Ned had been at home one day only, he received an invitation to a nice snug dinner with a few friends. After the cloth had been cleared, these friends presented him with a massive gold chain and watch; on the case a suitable inscription was engraved.

As he was owner as well as master of the Gull, he was looked up to by all, and was immensely popular, being known all over the marshes, from Romney to the Medway. No less popular in the village was his good-looking wife—a kind-hearted and helpful friend to all in sorrow or want, and of these there were only too many. Handsome Hannah was the name she went by before she was married to Captain Ned. About their marriage there was romance enough to make a good three-volume novel. A few facts are all we can give here.

Some years before the time of which we have been writing, Captain Ned had arranged to marry Hannah after taking one more voyage. She pleaded

hard with him to stop at home and be married at once, and not to go on that voyage. There was no necessity for it; they had more than enough now, she urged. When he rallied her on her fears and doubts, she replied that she could not tell why it was, but she dreaded this particular voyage as she had never dreaded anything in her life before; she had never been one given to presentiments, but now she declared herself full of forebodings of ill.

Laughing lightly, and telling her to keep her heart up, Captain Ned bade his sweetheart good-bye for two short months, as he told her.

The two months lengthened into six, from that to twelve, and no sign or word of the Swallow—that was his vessel then—or her master reached home. The change that came over Handsome Hannah was plain to all; but she bore her trouble bravely, and her widowed mother never heard a complaint from her lips, although the pain in her heart was shown plainly enough in her face. Two years passed away, and then kind-hearted neighbours hinted "that 'twas weary waiting for them as never came back—that the sea would give no tidings of them as it had claimed."

"Two years, Hannah, have you mourned for the dead; surely you have grieved long enough, dear

girl. Take heart and hope once more; the living can't never live by the dead."

So spake more than one who would gladly have filled the place of the absent lover. There had been another suitor for her hand besides Captain Ned; and when the rejected one found she could never be anything to him, he had gone about his business in his usual quiet way, like the man he was, but he had never married.

When his more fortunate rival was given up for dead, Luke did not at once try to renew his suit, although he met and spoke to her frequently; but presently he began to call in, to have a chat with her mother and herself occasionally; and she did not look coldly on him, having always felt the greatest respect and friendship for him. A third year passed, and then he again asked Hannah to be his wife. Her answer was that such love as she had felt for the one that was gone she had not to give. If he married her she would do her best to make him happy and to be a good wife to him—she could not promise more than that. He declared himself well content, and the time for their marriage was fixed.

On the night before the wedding morning, just as Hannah was retiring to rest, a peculiar rap came upon the door. Something in the sound made her spring towards it like some wild creature, and with

trembling hands and white face she undid the bolts. When the door was open, there stood before her a man in seaman's dress.

"Hannah! my girl!"

"Ned! oh Ned!"

So they met after long parting. In hurried, broken words he explained the cause of his absence. He had been a prisoner in a foreign land, he told her.

Begging her long-lost lover to stay where he was for a few minutes, Hannah threw a shawl over her head, and ran like a plover down the street to the house of the man she was to have married on the morrow. With a fast-beating heart and in troubled accents she told her tale.

The poor fellow staggered, and seemed as one struck for a few moments. Then recovering himself bravely, he said—

"It was to try to make you happy that I asked you to be my wife, Hannah; that could never be now. You are free from your promise to me; marry the one you love that has come back, though he'll never love you truer nor better than I would ha' done."

Hannah stood silent, pained in the midst of her joy by the sight of the white, set face of the true-hearted man before her.

"Bid me good-bye, Hannah, you will never see

me again; to-morrow I shall be off, not to return. May you and the man of your choice be happy!"

Her woman's heart felt more for him at that moment than it had ever felt before. With the tears running down her cheeks, and her hands on his shoulders, she said, "Luke, best of friends, and most generous, God bless you for all your kindness to me! You may think that you would have been happy if you and me had married; I doubt it. Good-bye!"

She took his face between her hands as a mother might that of her son, kissed him, and then vanished in the darkness.

Six months after that night a seaman lost his life in an heroic attempt to rescue the crew of a vessel wrecked on the Goodwins. Folks present said he was the coolest and most daring amongst the brave fellows who went out to that ill-fated brig. It was Luke. A stone marks his last resting-place, put there by the woman he loved so truly.

As I said before, the Gull and her captain went to sea in rough weather which drove other craft into harbour. That stormy November she had been out for a fortnight with the whole of her crew —old sea-dogs, the lot of them. During the summer months they were to be seen in front of their captain's house pacing to and fro—one half of the

crew in the morning, the other in the afternoon—with regular beat, passing and repassing as if on the brig's deck, dressed in dark-blue trousers, blue guernseys, crossed with wide white braces; tarpaulin hats and low shoes; and each man smoking a long clay pipe of the clean churchwarden type. Their tobacco was prime, too—of the very best sort grown—and they never could be persuaded to tell where they bought it; little communicative on any subject, they were least so on that of tobacco.

Captain Ned kept his crew all the year round, and paid them, work or play. It is needless to say they were devoted to him and all belonging to him.

When the Gull had been gone for two weeks without anything having been heard of her, that specially stormy season, the coast Preventive men kept a good look-out for her; they knew the time her usual trips lasted; and she, like all other vessels that rested in harbour, was regularly inspected directly her anchor was dropped. Nothing was ever found on her, you might be certain of that: the inspection was a courteous visit paid to a courteous captain, nothing more.

On the 24th of the month the wind rose to a regular hurricane, flooring the poplars and clearing the willows; for in that spongy soil the roots take but slight hold. The wind brought a high tide with it; at midnight boats came floating up the

streets—row-boats, some with men in them, some without.

"The tide is up!" they shouted.

The people, rushing out of bed and running down-stairs, plumped up to their middles in water amongst their floating furniture. Some dashed out after the fowls and pigs, in anger at the cross-grained perversity of pigs and the stupidity of fowls; for the pigs made frantic efforts to reach the sea, and the fowls flew flopping into it, as though they fancied it was high time they learned to swim. The storm died out towards morning, leaving havoc in all directions.

That same morning a baker was giving his son directions for a journey into the "ma'shes." Now, his son went by the name of Genus—short for genius; a kind of left-handed compliment that was meant for by the general community, which, as is usually the case, was short-sighted and wanting in discrimination. They said Genus was a fool with less brains than Sank, his donkey, that carried the bread in panniers to the lonely, isolated homes of the marsh folks twice a-week, fine or rough weather, regularly all the year round.

Those panniers were made by old "Wicker Bill," and were constructed to fit the sagacious Sank's ribs like a waistcoat well padded. Things

were not so well done in those days as they are now, we are often told; but some, we can certify, were much more thorough in their jobs; and this we know, that Sank's sides were never galled by his load, be it what it might. Clever at his work and in his contrivances was Wicker Bill, but the same reckless band that roused up Snoovey made themselves busy over the basket-maker. He had a weakness for fishing, and silver eels were his especial mark. For them he made certain wicker traps, which captured them by scores. The part where the fish entered was made wide, and was placed against the stream, so that any eel running down was sure to be caught. The keen eyes of the mischievous young scamps concealed in the bushes near watched William setting his traps; then, as soon as he was out of sight, they came out and reversed his eel-baskets, so that when he came for his eels, when they had been busy there, they were not to be found. The boys knew the time he came to look at them, and used to gather on the old tide mill bridge for the fun of seeing the expression on William's face as he lifted up the empty eel-baskets. The old man had a taste for natural history, and gratitude ought to have kept one out of that little game, for he had lent Denzil a water-colour drawing of a

cobra to copy; but being a healthy lad, he was callous in those days, and not given to sentimentality.

To go back to Genus, whom we left beside his heavy-laden donkey. Picture to yourself a shambling lad, tall and thin, with large hands and feet, a broad forehead, light brown hair, and great mournful-looking blue eyes, in which there was a strange far-away look. His mouth was always on the quiver, but not with merriment. When he did laugh now and again, at rare intervals, tears and laughter seemed mingled together. The lads that tormented Snoovey and Wicker Bill were one and all kind to Genus.

When he could join in their rough fun, no pranks were ever played on him, for as children they instinctively felt that he was different from themselves, though in what way they could not understand. Although very quiet, he seemed to enjoy all mad games most thoroughly. Whenever we see a specimen of the gentle-looking, large-eyed *Loris gracilis*, the form of Genus rises before us.

Sank, his donkey, was a fine animal, large and well cared for. He had a soul for music, and could sound his horn to some purpose. It was universally accepted by the lads that Genus loved him like a brother; that he always treated him

with the greatest kindness and consideration; and that the beast proved he had a proper sense of gratitude, and showed great affection in return for the oats and hay and the regular grooming he received from his master. So sprightly was he that none of the boys ever felt the least desire to ride him.

As Sank stood at the baker's door laden with bread for the ma'shes, and Genus at his head muffled up to the ears, getting his father's orders, old Nance came along the pavement, her voice uplifted as usual. The trouble that chastens and softens some natures makes others cantankerous. We hear much of the buds and blossoms that smell all the sweeter for being crushed and bruised; but alas for those poor bodies who are so constituted that calamities and afflictions, instead of tempering the heart, mount straight to the head, and act as an irritant on the brain!

"You ain't goin' ter send Genus to the ma'shes, surely, neighbour? You ain't goin' to do that to-day, are ye? 'Tain't safe; don't tempt yer luck—'tain't right ter do it. Finny Jack have jest come up from them ma'shes, an' he say that all last night the corpse-candles was all over the flats, jest as if the old Lord o' Shoreland's grinnin' sailor[1] had got all the poor souls

[1] The legend of the Lord of Shoreland—called Shurland in the

as has been drowned between this an' the foreland, an' was showin' 'em all over the place. 'Tain't safe ter be out night nor day when the corpse-candles is sin, so I tell ye."

"Genus and Sank 'll hev ter go if the corpses all hed lanterns instead o' candles, Nance. Ma'sh-folks must hev their bread."

"Jest so, you onfeelin' ole porpus! You feels for 'em, you do, more 'an you do fur Genus; yer heart is as soft as a beach pebble. Some folks hes childern as don't know how to tek care on 'em, an' other folks as a'most worships their shadders loses 'em. Good morning, ole porpus! I've told ye my mind, and giv ye warnin', anyhow."

When Sank and Genus were out of sight of the shop, Nance ran after them.

"Genus," said she, "folks reckons as ye ain't quite so 'cute as ye might be; p'r'aps ye ain't, but ye're good ter me an' ye're kind to Sank. Git yer journey over quick as ye can, an' reach home afore dark sets in, fur, unless I mistakes, there'll be wild work to-night. Good-bye, my boy; good-bye, Genus. Take care o' yourself; not one o' mine is left—no, never a one!"

'Ingoldsby Legends'—and the dead sailor was well known to the longshore folks when Denzil was a boy. The vane, too, on the old church tower was a horse's head.

After four miles' travelling, the pair reach the edge of the marshes and a turning of the road; there they make for a low reed-thatched dwelling on the flats, where one of the baker's customers lives. Just then Genus catches sight of a figure on horseback approaching at a rapid pace, clearing the wide dykes like a steeplechase rider. Two long-dogs follow him—"long-dog" is the marshmen's name for greyhounds, though these were not the dogs they breed now. Far grander creatures they were—more like deer-hounds, only smooth-coated and the ears fine as silk. They were well named, for long they were in every way—long-winded and long-striding, and for pluck and staying qualities not to be beaten; as sagacious, too, as collie-dogs.

Genus looks up and smiles as the rider nears him, for well does he know Flying Kit and her master.

"I am breathing her, Genus; she has been idle and got fresh the last day or two, and the dogs wanted a run. You won't have to go so far on this lot of flats to-day, for most of the folks are in the cottage yonder sorting out their cattle. The stock got mixed, gathering for shelter last night."

The long-dogs know the lad. They whimper with delight as he caresses them, placing their fore-feet on his shoulders and nearly knocking him

off his feet. Sank knows them too, and sounds his horn gaily, much to the disgust of Flying Kit, who shows his disapproval in a characteristic manner.

Did Kit's master wink at Genus, or was it the keen, cold air made one of his eyes blink? One thing is certain—that after this little meeting he turned his horse's head straight for the sea-wall, two miles away, and she took all the dykes as she neared them, closely followed by the dogs.

Reaching the cottage, Genus left a portion of his bread there, then turned for the road and the other marsh. Half-way a marsh-dweller meets him, and a conversation of some minutes takes place. Then Genus goes his way—a transformed Genus. His eyes have lost the far-away look and are all alive, and the quivering mouth is set firm. Sank, too, is a changed creature. At a word from his master his pace alters, and he patters over the marsh at a surprising rate, which soon brings the pair on to the highroad.

And there another meets him, accidentally again, of course—Winkle Joe.

When Genus met him he had a little talk, and gave him half his dinner, like the kind lad he was; then he struck once more into the marshes. Joe paddled along the hards for more "winks" after that refreshment of the inner man. He had picked

up about half a gallon when a shot was heard close to him, and a man came round the bend of the creek with a dead curlew that he had just shot—at least, one would suppose so. He stops and has a few words with Joe, and then goes off the hards into the marshes. As soon as he is well out of sight the wink-picker leaves his work and makes tracks for home at the top of his speed.

Genus has delivered his bread, and gets out of the marshes before it is quite dark. The road is very dreary and lonesome, but he does not mind this; and on reaching the most dreary part of all, with never a house in sight for two long miles, Genus does an odd thing. He jumps on Sank, puts a leg into each of those padded panniers, stands up in them, and tells his long-eared steed to go. Go Sank does with a will, and so does Genus, his long arms swinging like a couple of windmill sweeps as he flies by. This childlike lad cannot be just the fool that folks imagine him.

All at once he stops his galloping steed, for a small marsh-farm is near, close to the highroad. Here he has to stay for something.

"Genus, Genus," shouts a voice, "come an' git these oats! I've bin waitin' nobody knows how long fur ye ter come along. They're in bushel-bags, so one goes in one pannier, one in t'other. Mind ye gits home with 'em quick, fur ye're out on-

common late this turn—nigh on seven o'clock 'tis. Where hev ye been hanging about? Stop a bit; I knows ye ain't no scollard, an' I must hev some sort o' warrant fur them oats. I shan't be a minute."

Out he went, and in a few moments he returned with the constable of that small district, the shoemaker living close by.

"Jest ye witness I send these oats by Genus. Will ye see—I'll untie 'em? Ye knows these here is oats."

"Ay, I can swear to that in any court in the kingdom," says the constable.

"Now, Genus, my man, put Sank along quick," and off the farmer hurries the pair. That done, he tells the constable that he had "a little score ter settle with that 'ere slippery old porpus, Genus's father, an' he warn't quite sure if the old warmint was in his debt; no, he warn't werry sure on that 'ere p'int. An' now ye are here, ye ken hev a drop ter keep the cold out of yer mouth when ye cross the road. An' ye may jest as well measure one o' my young 'uns fur a pair o' shoes."

When Genus reached home his father told him he would unload and put Sank in the stable himself. First, however, he placed those bags of oats in the bakehouse and locked the door; then he fed

Sank. When he re-entered the bakehouse he untied the bags, and the oats were shot out on the floor. The cat was let out of each bag, too! One hundred pounds would not have purchased the contents of those two bushel-bags. Old porpus and Genus were not the fools they seemed to be, nor was the father as hard as old Nance made out, for the lad was let out to play that night, mournful and dreamy-looking as before. By way of cheering him up, the boys took him round to the smithy to rouse up Snoovey.

But no Snoovey was there. Turning a corner, they came on Nance, who tackled them in her own way.

"What are ye after, an' where are ye goin', ye young shrimpgrigs? Who have ye bin pesterin' now? an' whose doors have ye threshed? Ye're a nice lot, an' yer mothers must feel rare an' proud on ye, an' no mistake! But, bless yer merry hearts, be off home an' stop yer foolin' fur one night, anyhow. 'Tain't a night to be runnin' the streets. Git off home!"

Then the poor soul said, as though speaking to herself, "I had 'em once, as merry as any on ye; but they're gone, an' never more will I see 'em till the sea gives up its dead. I'll see 'em then! Home, ye shimpgrigs; git home!"

If the truth must be told, the boys seldom

threshed Nance's door, for the same reason that they did not mount Sank. Some folks, like some animals, are best left alone. The boys decided to take her advice and go home, for the women stood at their doors talking about their husbands being gone down to the ma'shes; they said the tide suited for the smacks making open water. Genus said his father had gone there too—for a shot at the fowl, he said, if he could get one; he had his duck-gun with him, anyway. And all the fishing crew were there also.

Heavy masses of cloud swept along, having here and there a break in them. Now and again a moan of the wind might be heard soughing up from the flats. Once or twice, when the blast was strong, the heavy black storm-clouds were torn asunder, showing a glint of cold grey. The look-out on the marsh was dreary —one vast mass of dark-grey. Dimly seen at times, as the clouds parted, was the top of the sea-wall that stretched like some huge sea-monster, turning and winding according to the line of shore.

With the exception of the wild call of the curlew, the rustle of dry flags, and the crash of reed-stems as the wind sighed through them, not a sound

broke the silence of those dreary flats. Now and then a light could be seen out in mid-channel, telling where the coastguard-ship lay. Not a living soul was to be seen or heard. If Genus's father came down on the flats to look for fowl, he came on a fool's errand.

The fishing-smacks have not left their moorings, though the tide is making fair for them to do so; there is a cluster of them close inshore. The tide will be full at twelve o'clock; it must be nearly that time now.

Hark! the hour strikes from the minster tower, some distance off; the sounds come booming over the water and across the flats, borne on the fitful blasts that come and go with mournful wail. It must have been urgent business that brought the men down on the marshes on a night like this. A flash and a report! Has Genus's father had a shot after all? Two more follow in quick succession —pistol-shots, and the guard-ship signal.

Now can be heard the rush of feet in the darkness, and the sound of horses in full stride. A whirling gust breaks up the mass of clouds for a few moments, and then men and horses can be distinguished coming up over the marsh and making for the lonely highroad we spoke of before. They are pursued, by the look of it, but they are well

ahead. A deep marsh dyke is in front of them. The horses take it in their stride; those on foot cross also, not by jumping, but on long broad planks, which are pulled out of sight, no one could see how or where. Yes, Bandy's long lines are of the best material.

And now another party appears on the scene, —the officer of the Excise, irreverently named Chimney-pot, for he was never to be seen by the vulgar crowd without his tall hat. They said he even slept in it. He had bought winks from Joe the evening before, and they had had some talk together. But he has certainly come to the wrong place now, if any captures are to be made.

He sets his men a brave example, however, by dashing down the sides of the sea-wall into the marsh, and calling on those with him to pursue and capture. Swiftly they run, himself the foremost one.

"What's that?" With a thud they are down, rolling over each other.

"What was it? Who did it?"

No one answers; there are bellows to mend. Their leader gets furious, for right in front is a dyke.

"Come on, my lads! follow me!" he cries; but no one answers; they have gone on another track.

He runs, jumps—in the uncertain light—short, and plumps into the water and mud. "Now may the great devil himself take them!" he cries; and there he sticks, about a foot from the edge, up to his waist.

From some bundles of reeds close to the dyke a figure, muffled up to the eyes, lifts up a threatening hand.

There was something about the peculiar swing of that arm very like Snoovey at his anvil. Some of Bandy's lines were very long too, capable of tripping up a whole line of runners.

A shot, another pistol-shot, and then comes the boom of duck-guns in quick time, one after the other; and now the sound of a horse at his top speed is heard. Listen to the momentary pauses in the beat of his hoofs as he takes the dykes. On the bold rider comes, nearer and nearer; he clears the last dyke and turns for the other marsh. Two dogs, long-dogs, run by his side. They look large, as though they had something wrapped round them. Once more the clouds break; and, by all the eels that ever were caught, if that mare is not Flying Kit!

Betwixt one and two the inhabitants of the village were roused from their sleep by the sound of horses galloping through the long street, and the cries of men in fierce pursuit. On and away,

they reach the bridge. Splash — a succession of splashes! The low hedge is cleared: they are on the soft turf, and each man walks his horse under the shadow of the alder and willow thicket. Then all is still. Unseen hands have taken their horses, and their riders have glided like ghosts into the white, ghost-like mill.

Two days later the Gull showed in sight and made the mid-day harbour-tide. She was boarded before she left the creek's mouth—the first time such a thing had happened. Rumour had said that a vessel, her very second self, only grey in colour, had been seen chased by a revenue-cutter, which had fired on her, and that she was then making for the French coast under every stitch of canvas she could carry.

Captain Ned, courteous as ever, listened to the rumour without the least expression of surprise, and without comment.

"Do your duty, gentlemen," was all he said when the revenue men boarded the Gull.

They found nothing — not even a pipeful of foreign tobacco or one foreign cigar. As to silks, laces, or spirituous liquors, such an idea was ridiculous!

The Gull had been in harbour one week after the

above event took place, when, to the unbounded surprise of all, she was declared to be for sale. Captain Ned said he had no further use for her; he was going to settle down for good.

Sold she was. All knew her sea-going capabilities, and those who had the money bid eagerly for her.

Blo'ard Ned's bold crew turned fishermen, each man becoming owner of a good stout boat—the gift, it was said, of their old master. However that may have been, they were still to be seen—faithful old dogs as they were—keeping watch before the house of their former commander.

For the benefit of those who may be curious to know what Captain Ned's end was, we can tell them that he died respected and regretted by numerous friends and admirers. We point no moral. These are but longshore sketches of smuggling days. "Handsome Hannah" did not long survive her husband; but that name was for years later a household word in many a marshland home where she had taken comfort and gladness.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A NIGHT ON THE FLATS.

"IF you want a shot at black-geese, come with me to-night, down past Standgate Creek: it's light o' nights now, and the tide serves right for it. There's clouds of 'em feedin' on the sea-grass."

So spake Den's fishing and fowling friend commonly known by the name of "Finny," by reason of being by far the best fisherman in our out-of-the-world hamlet in the salt marshes of North Kent. A genuine old sea-dog he was, and equally at home with net, long line, or duck-gun. In the stormiest weather, such as would have kept most of our fishing folk on shore, Fin was apparently in his element. He was a few years older than Den, and his companion and guide in many an expedition on the flats and along the shore, being well versed in all the quags and swamps of our treacherous

marshes. The spots Finny fought shy of, all others gave a wide berth to.

"Yes, Fin, I will go, and be glad to. Where do they feed?"

"About the spit 'twixt Standgate and Chesney they gits mostly on and about the ooze and slub round Halstow, and from there to Rainham; very often they goes right away, clean out to sea. 'Tain't often they comes in like this, but there's rattlin' good feed fur 'em about that spit; the ooze and slub there is covered, like a thick carpet, with sea-grass what they likes. They won't leave it, now they've found it, ye may depend on't."

The place Finny spoke of was one of the most lonely spots on our lonely coast. The spit was a point of marshland running out into the water, dividing the lands of two marsh graziers. The wash of the tide round it had formed two bays, so that if there were a boat in each bay, the spit would most effectually hide the occupants of one boat from those of the other. It was raised about ten feet above the water on one side—the side they intended shooting from; the marsh had not been washed away by the rush of the tide so much there.

The friend's grounds over which Den usually shot did not extend so far as that. He pointed this out to his companion.

"It's all right, boy; I knowed you'd say that:

but I see the looker this mornin', fur I see a lot of the geese about as I was comin' in from open water. I tried then fur a shot, but it waun't no go. So when I see the looker close inshore, I slung him a skate,—a rattler,—a real good 'un, what weighed twenty pound if it weighed one; enuf to keep his crew at home fur a week almost. He likes 'em. An' I puts the question to him, ef I an' a mate o' mine could come on his ground fur a shot to-night at them geese; jist fur one, an' no more. An' he said, 'Yes, jist fur one, and fur once.'"

"But how about his two bears, Fin?" That was the name they gave to his two enormous bob-tailed sheep-dogs, either of which, with his full coat on, was capable of catching a great marsh hare. They were unpleasant customers to meet, for their manner of warning off trespassers was most effectual. They would catch hold of you by some portion of your clothes, and hold you fast till their master came up. Try and get away you dared not.

"They'll not touch us. I told him he could hev another bit of fish next time as the boat come by, if he waun't tired of it; an' he said that was all right, an' would suit him to a T. He's stoved the bow of his punt in, so she lays high an' dry in the blite close to the ooze—she's got to lay there till he ken git her docked; and he said he'd

draw her broadside on to the ooze, in among the blite, an' put some dry bents in the bottom fur us to lay on, all snug like. The tide flows eleven o'clock; they geese floats up an' guzzles that grass, an' they're sure to cum right up on tu the edge of the flat. An' when they's floated up an' on the feed, you an' me, boy, ken rake 'em fore an' aft. We'll take Rover—he's as good as a man on board, as far as keepin' watch is consarned, an' they bears wun't be loosed, jist fur this one night. He shell hev as much fish as he ken tuk in next time the boat cums round by the spit again."

"Fin."

"What's up now?"

"It's bitter cold on the flats. Shall I get——"

"Now bless your heart, stow that; ye wun't git nuthin' o' the sort—that's purvided. I'm goin' ter tell ye somethin'. Some o' they codfish as I hed aboard lately was as big as childern, an' they was all middlin' pot-bellied. Prime fish, in good order, they was; but I never knowed afore as they was given over to drinkin', seein' as they was allus in water. But jest out o' curiosity, ye know, I shoves my fist down one o' the big un's gullet, an' ef I didn't ketch hold of a bottle of the best Howdu-we, what he'd bolted. An' some of the others hed some inside 'em as well. I took 'em all out

afore I sold the fish. No, no, boy, we're all right fur the ague medicine—real good stuff, too."

Finny and Den agreed to meet at half-past nine for their tramp on the flats. The night was fine, and there was moonlight—all that could be desired; but it was bitterly cold when they met at the bottom of the straggling village street, with their heavy long-barrelled duck-guns under their arms, the locks securely bound round with an old worsted stocking—a precaution never omitted by a regular shore-shooter. They knew well that even if everything turned out right, they should only have one shot, so they did not want to miss fire.

Fin had on his long sea-boots and heavy ribbed fishing-stockings, a long guernsey reaching low down, and on his head a good sou'wester. Den's outfit was different. He had waterproof boots on his feet and a close-fitting cloth cap on his head; covering the rest of his person was a "fiddle bag," as they called it—that was a good stout round frock, one of the best things for keeping out wind and weather that we know. The night being fine and dry, Den wore the fiddle bag belted round the middle.

Through the silent and deserted streets they went,—the folks were nearly all in bed, for they kept early hours,—and out on the road that led to the uplands which would take them down to the edge of the flats, past lonely farmhouses, where all

was at rest with the exception of the sheep-dogs, who barked loudly as their footsteps sounded on the hard road. On they walked past the duck decoy, where the men were busy keeping the ice off the pond, so as to have it ready for the ducks to come in as soon as it got light in the morning. Then the poor things would go up those pipes for the first and last time, going in at one end well and hearty, but coming out to be laid in rows at the other with their necks broken.

The dog ran in between Fin and Den, his nose just on a line with their legs, as they tramped on, keeping step. Rover knew his business and his place too, right well; he was something more than a mere animal to fetch fowl out of the water. The large rough-coated spaniel was Fin's constant companion, and was treated as a friend, and he knew and appreciated it.

And now they are on the edge of the flats, and before them is a long stretch fading away in the distance out of sight—a dreary length of neutral tint, for though the moon is high up and bright, objects are not easily defined. Mists float about and freeze as they rise; the countless mole-hillocks throw flickering shadows, so that land and water, clumps of dry flag and reed, are all blended in one long stretch of monotonous grey. One consolation they have,—there is no snow.

They are well on their way, the dog in exactly the same position as when they started, close in between them. Now and again a rush is heard as some hare speeds away; he is just caught sight of as a moving grey streak, for one instant and no more. Rover takes no notice of him whatever, or if he does he makes no sign. They come on the highroad once again—it just divides the two marsh flats, of which they have crossed the smaller one, —a long tramp already, but there is worse to come.

Strange to say, elm-trees line the road here on one side; their branches reach completely over it. A rookery has been established in them for so long a period that it is beyond all marshland records. Close to this rookery is the quaint old grey marsh church. It is small, but very picturesque. Many a time has Den been up in its old flint tower and out on the leads, to look at the flats in their beauty as evening drew near, and they became flooded in that golden light that transfigured even the grey slub.

As they pass by the trees Fin utters the single word "Rooster." It is quite enough to make Den laugh so heartily as to cause the dog to look up at him in great wonder: such unusual behaviour when they are on one of their silent expeditions startles old Rover.

They both knew Rooster: he was a most enthusiastic admirer, breeder, and fighter of game-birds—duckwing, ginger, pile, and black-breasted, as the various kinds were termed in the marshes. Hence his nickname.

Now this particular rookery was claimed by a grazier who went by the name of "Hookey," for equally justifiable reasons.

As the rooks' nests were right over the road, it was often very unpleasant to pass under the trees during the breeding season. When the lasses went to church on summer evenings, all in their best Sunday finery, if any of them lingered with their lads to have a few words and a little harmless flirtation before going in to service, more than one has exclaimed with good cause, "Drat old Hookey's rooks!" Their fathers, walking steadily by in all the glory of drain-pipe hats polished with their silk pocket-handkerchiefs, have expressed themselves in even stronger terms.

Rooster was courting one of the girls who was a regular attendant at the old church, and when she had occasion to drat the old rooks, Rooster was the first to be made aware of the fact. So he told her he'd "thin some o' old Hookey's black varmints off."

In due time he took the job in hand: he was like a monkey for climbing the trees to get at the

eggs and the young ones. Both summer and winter he only wore one kind of head-gear — a fisherman's red woollen cap, knitted by himself, finished off with a long end and a tassle. The cap hung jauntily down over one shoulder. The number of different articles I have seen him put into that cap was something incredible. He had it on his head, of course, when he went for the rooks.

The grazier heard a commotion, and slipped quietly across the turf underneath the trees. Presently he made out Rooster's figure as he was descending. When he was near enough, he placed his hand—by no means a light one—on the trespasser's jacket-collar. Rooster held his cap, full of young rooks and eggs, firmly between his teeth. He knew well whose hand was on him, but he uttered never a word.

Not so the grazier. "I'll drag ye to the light, ye villain, whoever ye be; ye'll suffer for this!" he cried.

Never a word still from the Rooster, but piteous gabblings from the imprisoned young rooks. A few more steps and a change took place. Rooster had firmer footing, and he became the assailant. Grasping the unfortunate grazier by the throat with one hand, with the other he swung his precious red cap over his head and brought it down on that of Hookey, not once but many

times—so many, in fact, that nothing was left of it but a long wisp in his hand. Then he left the rookery proprietor to allow him to hurry indoors to wash off a conglomeration of squashed young rooks and eggs.

As Rooster observed to Den afterwards in strict confidence, "'Twas a bit o' a jidgment on the hookin' old varmint fur harberin' things to spile my gell's bonnet fust time as she'd ever wore they flowers in it;" adding, too, "They was French flowers; I got 'em a' purpus fur her, fur a birthday present like. They cum over the ma'shes; they'd niver sin the inside o' any shop this side o' the water."

Once more on the flats, they are making now for the spit. Here the water lies in long brackish lagoons, showing fitfully in flashes. "Shel we skirt the Dead Men's Lantern bit?" asks Fin. "'Twill be nighest; but ef ye don't like it, say so, boy, an' we'll mek for another track."

"We'll go the Lantern way, Fin. I don't think we'll see any lights to-night."

The foul gas from the reek of the rotten marsh made lights often enough in that old haunt of the heron and the bittern. The old village crones always attributed them to the uneasy souls of those who had been drowned on that dreary shore, and not received Christian burial.

The spot that went by the name of Dead Men's Lantern had a most evil name, and not without reason. It was a bit of the marsh road that had been made through a swamp of the worst description. No one unfamiliar with such localities can form any idea of the sickening smell that rises from these places, the breeding-spots of deadly marsh fever and ague. Denzil paid the penalty for learning the secrets of his native marshes: it was only after he had spent many years in a healthier county that he began to recover from the effects of renewed attacks of fever and ague in his youth. It may seem a matter of small moment to one who reads this, seated beside a cosy fire; but the various means by which the knowledge of the ways and the haunts of the fowl has been gained has more than once nearly cost our naturalist his life.

As they trudge on, bird-life begins to assert itself by sounds; but though there are hundreds of the fowl all round about, it is still so grey that you are not able to see them. Presently they spring up in every direction,—a shiver and a flash,—gone instantly.

Then a faint bark is heard; the dog looks up for one instant, but drops his head again. Nearer comes the hoarse bark-like call. Finny turns to Den, and says, "One o' them Bargander ducks callin' to her mate." He is right, as usual; it is a

female sheldrake that has just risen from the mussel-scalps, calling for her mate that has probably been shot, not far away.

That object like a small haystack, half a mile distant, is the looker's cottage; they are now nearing the spit. Here Den's companion takes the lead, for they are in a most intricate network of land and water. As the gullies are low, the tide coming up finds its way here before the ooze is covered.

Presently Fin motions to the dog, and points in front. Rover takes the lead now: in less than ten minutes they are on firm ground, close to the spit.

Fin turns to Den and places a finger on his lips. Not a sound now, not a footfall, if they can avoid it. From the opposite side of the spit a mob of curlews spring up, shrieking frantically as they shoot overhead and dash down the creek. If Den and his companion had but known the cause of the flight, it would have been better for them; but a shoreshooter's life is full of chance, and only too often the chances are against him.

Rover sniffs, and Finny points to something in a hollow half hid by the sea-blite. It is the looker's punt, with the dry bents in its bottom. Rover steps in, takes the middle, Finny the bow, Den the stern, and they crouch.

Presently Fin touches Den's hand with a bottle. One good draught, and Den feels the blood coursing freely in his veins. All things taken into consideration, they are in clover. The moon shines right on them and on the coming tide. But where are the geese?

Not far off: Den and Fin can hear them gabble. Thousands of ox-birds or dunlins rush past over the ooze. Curlews pitch close to the punt, feeding busily; you can see them before they settle. After they settle they are, to all intents and purposes, invisible. Fowl at night look grey, the same colour as the slub. You can only fire in the direction you think they should be from the sound of their feeding, and then send your dog. But dunlins are not the game to-night.

The geese are here; Finny and Den can see them coming up, a waving cloud. They are lowering, have pitched, and begin feeding. As the water floats them, they will come nearer and nearer. Even now can be discerned some grey spots just off the spit; they will be in sight directly. Now they show in the full light, as they swim and turn down their necks to reach the grass, which is covered with them. Their hind parts show white as they guzzle away, all unconscious of the fowler's nearness to them.

The coverings are taken off the locks, for the

guns had been carefully loaded with swan-shot before starting. Rover pokes his nose just over the punt's side, ready to dash away. Now for it! The guns just touch the shoulder, when, from the other side of the spit, from the little bay hidden from their sight, comes the report of four duck-guns, one after the other. Two had been fired at the geese as they floated up, and two as they rose in dire confusion. They heard them fall, thud, thud, and then a skiff was put out.

It was enough,—more than enough: Den and Finny crept off, after looking at each other, without a word. When they were about two miles on their homeward way Fin stopped, looked earnestly at Den, drew the bottle from his pocket, took a long pull, and handed it to him, saying, "Finish it."

Then his tongue was freely loosened. "Of all the rum starts that ever I cum across since I first paddled about, this licks all." Den quite agreed with him. It was by no means pleasant to be forestalled.

All fowlers know that the best-laid plans are apt to fail. When they are told of some one who *never* goes home empty-handed, they say, "He uses silver shot."

CHAPTER XIX.

HOW THE CHOLERA CAME TO MARSHTON.

ONE summer Marshton had a worse foe to contend against than even fever and ague. The fishing community to which most of Den's mother's people belonged occupied the lower part of the village, close to the water's edge. Their cottages were solidly built, roomy, and comfortable, but the living-rooms of most of these were below the level of the pavement; you had to go down three or four steps to reach the doors. No doubt they had been built in this way to shield the houses and their inhabitants, in some measure, from the fierce blasts that blew directly off the water. At one time the tide never reached them, as it had a vast extent of uninhabited flat to flow over, there being only a sea-wall on one side of the creek. Later on fresh people came and settled on those low-lying lands; they built themselves a sea-wall, as

well as quays and ship-yards. Then the water, having nowhere to spread at the time of the high tides, flooded the streets of the fishing quarter.

The fisher folks, being neither able to carry their houses up higher nor yet rich enough to build others, had to make the best of it, and to get out the water when it invaded their homes as best they could.

Now their favourite food was pork — fish they only ate when it was a matter of necessity. Every fisherman managed to keep a pig, and each cottage had its own garden; the pig was always kept in the lower part of the gardens, where the tide made most havoc.

All who have had anything to do with pigs, know well that more obstinate, more cantankerous creatures do not exist. If any doubt this fact, let him try to root a pig out of his sleeping-place after he has settled down for his night's rest. The fisherman, finding the water had risen up to the animal's bed-place, would curse its obstinacy, and his forcible expostulations, added to the expostulating gruntings of the pig, made the scene a very lively one. Sometimes the pigs managed to break loose, and then, instead of making for dry land, they invariably took to the open water, and their owners had to run for their boats to

go to the rescue of these valuable but wilful animals.

The mischief done by the flooding of the lower parts of the houses, and the refuse left everywhere, was most disheartening to the fisher folk, added to their days and nights of unremitting toil, which was poorly repaid and full of hazard.

As the shipping that visited the creek lay at the bottom of the town, all the dressing required for the land of the upland farms had to be drawn through the whole length of the place; there was only one approach for waggon traffic. The manure mainly used was fish, in some shape or other, tons upon tons of it, varying in kind according to the seasons. Guano or chemical dressings were then unheard of about Marshton.

Sprats they carried through, waggon-load after waggon-load, then star-fish, commonly called "five-fingers," mussels, and other small matter that they dredged for. The sprats and other fish were fresh and good, but there was no sale for them.

The bottom boards of the waggons were mostly loose, to allow of their being taken up to suit convenience. In any case there was plenty of room between the joints for moisture to run out; and when they were in use for fish carting, a very strong and old fishy smell could be perceived for a long time afterwards. Some of the folks used to say

that, what with the stuff that went through the place, and what with the muck left by the tides, it was a wonder some pestilence or other had not visited the town earlier.

There had been a fine autumn, but the winter set in rather soon, and it promised to be a hard and rough one. Contrary to expectation, the cold passed away quickly, and the following spring and summer were unusually warm, the weather becoming at last hotter than any remembered before. One of the retired old sea-dogs—"Rover Morgan," he was styled—who had been in many lands, and seen more than most, shook his head and muttered to himself as he pulled away at his pipe on the quay.

"What ails ye, Morgan?" one or another would ask; "what ails ye that ye keeps mumblin' to yerself, an' scannin' up aloft? 'tis fine enough an' hot enough, sure, for any man livin'."

Or it would be, "Ye keeps a-mutterin' and sez nuthin': be ye goin' to put one o' them West Indy spells on us?" Old Rover Morgan had a great and mysterious reputation among the fisher folk. He was known to have seen and gone through much in his day.

"No, I ain't a-goin' to try any spells," the old man would answer; "bein' nought but a sailor, 'tain't in my line. But if I don't mistake, there's

somethin' comin' that's worse than all they devil's tricks put together. I've sin weather like this afore, an' somethin's sure to happen. I've had word from one o' my old shipmates, too, that it ain't far off now; an' ef it does come 'twill wreck this here place for sure. I don't say as 'twill come —I don't want to frighten ye; but if it does come, why, 'twill be the cholera-morbus."

They were not moved in the least, being an easy-going set; the old boy was touched a bit, they said, through a cut he got in the head, "boardin' a vessel one time. The weather was hot, an' it made him wuss; 'twas strangely hot, it took the life out o' ye."

Day after day Rover Morgan walked on the quay, pulling hard at his pipe. One afternoon it was observed that he took the pipe out of his mouth very suddenly, and looked at what seemed to be a couple of jackdaws, high up in the air.

"'Tis a pair o' ravens," muttered the old man; "the place is doomed. Don't ye hear 'em croak? We shall hev it now."

Before the week was out news came that one had died suddenly, down in the marsh, before medical aid could reach him. Then the plague was in the town, one here and one there was taken, two or three in a week. After that it came in full force.

Old "Titlark," the gravedigger, was no more to

be seen coming slowly down the street, as he used, with pick and shovel over his shoulder. Young Titlark was no longer needed to scour and polish at the tools at home; for they stayed in the churchyard, and the old man had to have another man to help him to dig the graves.

The folks were panic-stricken,—such a visitation had not come to Marshton within the memory of the oldest of the inhabitants. To add to their terror, their doctor was struck down among the earliest victims,—struck down dead at his post, whilst attending one of his patients. He had fought bravely first. Then the simple fisher folks lost all heart. He had been their friend as well as their doctor. With their strong, emotional, religious tendencies, what more natural than that they should gather constantly at their meeting-house, and pray that "this evil might be averted before their cup of misery was full to overflowing"? "One was taken and the other left" in grim reality. None knew when he lay down to rest whether he would see the light of day again.

Then poor old Titlark, the mild, friendly old sexton, was taken; another dug his grave with the man's own pick and shovel. Volunteers came forward to dig the graves and to carry away the dead. An order of Brothers of Pity was formed in our village [redacted] lads; but Rover

Morgan led the band, and it was mainly owing to his sturdy common-sense that the volunteers offered themselves. "None o' us kin die but on'y once, on sea or on land," he said, "and on'y when his time come; an' 'tis best tu die doin' yer dooty."

Never in the annals of Marshton had that churchyard been so disturbed before; the fresh graves looked like mole-hillocks in some huge meadow. By day and night they dug and buried uninterruptedly. Old Morgan told his fellow-volunteers to drink no water unless it had first been boiled, and had something strong in it. This advice they readily enough followed. Brandy was never a scarce article in the marshlands, and there was plenty of it in that burying-ground. Fresh medical aid came—there was no lack of it; but still the folks died. The remedies known now, and the sanitary measures of the present day, were not in force then.

The bearers were not sufficient, many volunteers though there were. As they passed down the street with their sad burdens, women cried to them from their doors, in frenzied tones, to come in and carry away their dead. The mortality in the small town was awful; it seemed like extermination.

The medical men did their arduous work like heroes. They did their best also to calm the

people, and showed by their brave example that they knew no fear themselves.

Some who were struck down pulled through, but more died.

Then the more rationally-minded, sensible people tried their utmost to avert a morbid outbreak of fanatical religious enthusiasm on the part of those of the stern puritanical sect who had a hold on the fisher folks. They dreaded their disturbing influence on minds and bodies weakened by the terrible visitation. This they succeeded in keeping in check mainly through the doctors' wise counsel and the courage of those brave young fellows, the bearers of the dead, who still had their sweethearts left to them.

When these heard that "certain chosen vessels" had formed a plan for holding gatherings to denounce the place as "a doomed spot for the Divinity to pour down His vials of wrath on," the brave lads went to these leading spirits and told them plainly that if they did not keep their mouths shut they should be compelled to. They threw such meaning and force into their words that the chosen vessels held their tongues and kept closely indoors.

One of the local magnates, considered to be a very fussy individual, observed that not one of the tanners employed in the large tan-yards had been attacked with illness. He concluded that tan

burned in the street might be very beneficial; and, being one of the overseers of the parish, his words had weight. He directed heaps to be placed at intervals along the street, and they were lighted at night under his superintendence. One of these happened to be right opposite old Morgan's door.

The Rover was going up-stairs to bed just as "old Sol"—short for Solomon, the overseer's nickname—had begun to give his orders for the lighting of the tan fires. The old salt watched the proceedings from his bedroom window with rather an amused air, until they arrived at the one by his own dwelling. Then he poked his head out of his window, "Be ye a-goin' to light thet heap o' muck afore my house?" he cried; "fur ef ye are, I'll cum down an' give ye a smack across yer gills with my tar-brush, ye jolter-headed old fool! Do ye want folks to think theirselves in hell afore their time? Go home an' hide yer foolishness; ef ye'd bin any good, ye'd ha' bin dead an' buried yerself long ago!"

The dead silence that followed this choleric outburst was broken by a woman's voice crying in tones of wailing rather than of consolation, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith the Lord; speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem."

The words fell with strange effect on the still

air and on the disturbed spirits. It was the voice of a young woman who had lost her husband.

"Ah, lass!" the old man muttered, "ye're right there; 'tis the Lord's comfort an' not foolery we're wantin' here." He pulled the casement to with a vicious slam, and retired to rest.

The brave old fellow went through the very thick of the fight without being attacked himself. Some constitutions seem proof against disease.

The havoc made by the cholera in the outlying districts was awful. Many died without medical aid, being so isolated in their marshland dwellings; and the small hamlets had no resident doctors near, although these went cheerfully as fast and as far as their horses could take them; often they found their patients had died before they could reach them.

In these places religious fanaticism had full swing. Weird hymns were sung which bore a strong resemblance to those we read about as sung by the negroes on the slave plantations in the Southern States of America, "Swing low, chariots!" and the like.

Sometimes the younger fishermen would walk out to the neighbouring hamlets for a change, or to visit acquaintances, by twos or threes; for all trade —and the fishing—was at a complete standstill. They brought back odd scraps of hymns and re-

frains that they had heard, which seemed to make the flesh creep all over Denzil. There was one unearthly dirge that they sang with strange fervour in the very midst of their dead and dying. The refrain is all that remained in his memory, but it was called a resurrection hymn, "We shall soon see them rising in the old churchyards!" and another, "We shall see the gates a-swinging on that great day!" And one most dismal chorus went to the very marrow of his bones, "Oh, poor sinners, you can't stand the fire!"

When the surroundings are taken into consideration, the terror and panic caused amongst the younger members of the community can well be imagined.

Out of all this evil great good came. Sanitary measures, much needed in those out-of-the-world marsh villages, were enforced, and many old fever-haunted spots, and human dwellings unfit for habitation, were swept off the face of the country, or made wholesome and thoroughly drained.

At last the cholera left Marshton, as suddenly, it seemed, as it had entered. Business became brisk again; the fishing-boats were afloat once more; and the living had time to visit the large graveyard and count their graves. The brown rough heaps of earth showed conspicuously apart from the green turf. Healthy life began to stir and throb in the

place once more. Scoot had lost his mother, Winder had buried his brother and sister; the three young lads were often among the graves. Some of their stern Calvinistic relatives, taught self-control from their earliest years, crushed down their sorrow to all outward appearance; but more than once did Den hear that terrible sound of a man crying out in the agony of grief, ring through the Marshton burying-place.

CHAPTER XX.

AT HOME IN SURREY.

DEATH brings many changes. One effect of the havoc it had wrought in Marshton was the breaking up of the Magniers' home on the marshes, and it was deemed advisable for him and his brothers to seek a home elsewhere. It was thought, too, that a change to a drier and more hilly county would benefit him and other members of his family, who had suffered from repeated attacks of fever and ague.

All Den heard about the beauties of the wooded hillsides of Surrey and its wind-swept commons, of all its wealth of flowers and its wild life in the shape of fur, fin, and feather, took hold of his imagination, and made the idea of parting with his longshore associations easier than it might otherwise have been.

The evening before he left, he went with Scoot

and Winder to say good-bye to all. The neighbours of his two faithful friends in the long village street forgot all the grudges they had borne for repeated door "larrupings." Old Nance, as she placed her withered hand on his shoulder, said, "God bless you, boy! and I hope He may see fit to give you an' yours a better time than ye've had here."

"An' now ye must pay old Snoove a visit," said Scoot,—"and," he added, in a most mournful tone, "what with the colery set out, an' your goin' away, Den, there wunt be many more larks nor foolishness here for a good bit."

"Good luck to ye all in yer new home, boy!" said the sturdy blacksmith, as he shook him heartily by the hand; "never come back to live on the flats agin if ye can help it."

Before it was fully daylight the next morning, his two friends met him at the cross-roads to start him on the one that would take him "so far away," as they deemed it. "We've been like brothers, Denzil," said Scoot; "ye'll cum back to us some day, if ye live. Ye belongs to us;" and with a hard grip of the hand they parted.

And what a wonderful difference two, even one hundred miles may make! To Denzil it was like going to a foreign land; compared with the swampy flats it seemed indeed a paradise; all was new and strange, yet beautiful. After the

dreary bareness of the marshlands, it was luxuriant and fair past belief. Vegetation, animals, birds, and insects, all had a special interest for the youth who was now approaching manhood, and whom a passionate love of nature was likely to touch to finer issues in a county more favourable for the development of his capabilities.

That county is indeed one of the fairest in England. The woods, hills, fields, and hedgerows, its heaths and commons, rivers and brooks, became, to the fullest extent that daily business would allow, his hunting-grounds. He was soon as familiar with them as he had been with the pestilential swamps and the wild shore of his native place. Letter-writing was not at that time —about forty years ago—so universally practised as it is now; and Den's fishing friends were well satisfied with one letter during the course of each year, just to let them know that the "boy," as they always called him, was well, and doing well.

In leaving the home on the marsh and his kinsfolk, Denzil at first missed the old social life amidst the congenial and familiar surroundings of his boyhood. In the town where he and some of his family settled, they had none of the prestige that came from ties of relationship with one of the oldest and most respected families in the neighbourhood. The quaint old house of the Portreeve

and all its treasures of art, and home traditions of their heroic ancestors who had given up house and lands across the sea for conscience' sake, became a thing of the past, not without some pangs of regret. But health of body, and the newness of Denzil's surroundings, with fresh materials for the enjoyment he had in the pursuit of his ruling passion, compensated in a very large measure for what had to be left behind.

Whatever time could be spared from the trade by which his living had to be earned, he spent in wandering over all the hills and valleys that lay within reach. For some time he neglected the use of his pencils; but a new impetus in the direction of art was given him one day when, during one of his country rambles, he came across a boy who had, with his hands, just groped out a tench about half a pound in weight from a brook chocked up with weeds. It was a beautiful creature, he thought; all the sea-fish he had ever seen or helped to eat were as nothing compared with that golden-green fish before him.

Would the boy sell it? he asked.

That he was ready enough to do. No haggling was there over the bargain; the price Denzil offered made the boy open his sleepy eyes in astonishment. "I'll bring ye a perch fur nuthin' to-morrow," he said, "ef ye'll tell me where ye are bidin'."

Then the water-colours were brought out once more, and with most loving care the two fish were painted.

Another man he fraternised with in his wanderings told him about pike; and, better still, took him to a large mill-pond, where he could see the great fierce fish basking in the sun close to the water's edge. To one who had fished from the shore from groins, breakwaters, and sluice-gates, this seemed a paradise for angling purposes, and after that the fishing-rod was a frequent companion with him. At any time, if Denzil heard of anything in the shape of fin, fur, or feather, he wasted few words, but as soon as might be he "made tracks" for the locality where it was reported to be. Life would indeed have been a blank to him if he had been hindered in his loved pursuits. Having been accustomed to breast the waves from his childhood, the tranquil waters of the woodland county were as nothing to Den. He swam and dived in the very early mornings and the late evenings, when the prosaic toil, and ofttimes drudgery, of his daily work was over, exploring the haunts of the otter and water-vole, the grebe, rail, and heron, thinking himself well rewarded if, from some clump of sedges or bulrushes, he could, unseen, watch the creature he was in search of.

As may be easily surmised, this pursuit of know-

ledge in the shape of natural history was not carried on without comment from many who could not understand the value of anything on earth that did not bring money. When Denzil was out of sight and hearing—for he was a strong fellow, and his temper had a way of blazing out when provoked that was somewhat formidable—men would shake their dull noddles and say no good would come of all that mooning and idling about, "staring at things as were no manner of use to him." At any rate he was happy in his pursuits, both day and night, which is more than could be said of most of those "cackling false prophets," as Den called them at times. In time they grew tired of expressing their opinions, finding it a mere waste of breath; and "the bug-hunting, owlet-catching fellow" was not only let alone to his beetle and bird captures, but some would even bring him a creature they deemed rare. Many a bird or animal would he take home, presented by some rustic or fellow-workman, and before going to bed make a drawing of it in its natural surrounding of herbage or twigs, to give to the man who had presented him with the original creature, or told him where to look for it. Sometimes a gentleman of kindred tastes would note the youth in his wanderings, and give him permission to roam or fish where he pleased.

Denzil threw all his energy into the trade he had chosen, in order to make himself competent at it; and from the time he became obliged to give himself up more assiduously to his daily work, he had actually finer opportunities for the pursuit of the study of natural life than before. No man has greater opportunities for the study of nature than some classes of workmen, especially in country districts. They have to rise early, and to walk some distance in many cases. It is fortunate for them if their work lies near home, as bitter weather must often be encountered early and late; and whatever it may be, they have to turn out in it. But Den found many advantages in his longer walks to and fro; and often his employment took him to some nobleman or gentleman's country seat, where he would be working for months together, and lodging in some cottage in the woodlands near, from Monday till Saturday afternoon. About those mansions he saw much that the public were prohibited from approaching. Often he made friends with some one in authority, who would invite him to look about at what was closed to others. Many of the large finely timbered parklands where he might roam freely were, and still are, sanctuaries for wild life in all shapes.

A fence, grey and moss-covered, was all, at other times, that stood between the workman walking along the highway and some interesting domain;

or the bridle-path along which his way led would run right through a fine, well-preserved estate.

In this way Denzil found ample food for his hunger for knowledge. In such places and round them, for instance, he watched the whole tribe of woodpeckers, from the great green woodpecker with his yike, yike, yike! to the lesser spotted woodpecker of the side-drum rattle; also the nut-hatch, creeper, and, in its season, the wryneck. All of these live and nest—if a hole in a tree can be called a nest—in old timber, which is seen in the greatest perfection in the park-lands.

At last the time came when he was his own master, free to think and act as he pleased, also to go where he liked, having a trade in his fingers, a small amount of money in his pocket,—not too much of it,—and a stout ash stick in his hand. With sketch-book and pencils in his pocket he started out on his wanderings, intending, whilst his money lasted, to see all he could of the Weald of Surrey, Sussex, and Kent, with all its wealth of animal and bird life, its fish, reptiles, and insects. What was there to prevent a stout, healthy young fellow of twenty-one, unencumbered, with his life and the world before him?

On large buildings in course of construction workmen from various counties and districts will be found; and, without being naturalists, they will often talk about the wild creatures one or the other

has seen in his own district, or in the course of his wanderings. Den's ears were always open to such conversation, and he stored all up in his mind ready for his own benefit when the time came when he should be his own master.

The Weald was not then so well known as it is now.

Away started Denzil, as soon as he was free, to see for himself all that his fellow-workmen had told him of. For a time he would stay in some good-hearted forester's cot in the heart of the woods; then away he moved to a moorland region, where the conditions of life varied. St Leonard's forest, Tilgate, Ashdown, and the line of country where the Medway rises, to the point where it reaches the tide, he explored fully. And that was then a rich mine for the naturalist. He was up at daybreak, before the blackcock had got the night dew dried from his glossy plumage, returning again to his lodging at midnight, when even the fern-owls take a short rest from their insect-exterminating labours. Is it possible for that giant night-swallow to feel tired at all? one wonders.

From the Kentish to the Sussex coast, over the hills inland, once more, by lakes, ponds, and streams, over moorlands and through bogs; and then, after five years' prowling and roaming about, home to the foot of the Surrey hills.

CHAPTER XXI.

CHRISTMAS WITH OLD FRIENDS.

BEFORE finally settling down, however, Denzil wrote to his friends Scoot and Winder to say he hoped, if all went well, to be with them on Christmas eve. This news was received all through the fishing quarter with great interest and pleasure.

No traces of delicacy of health, or of the effects of marsh fevers, were visible in the upright stalwart figure, nearly six feet in height, wiry-looking to a degree, and as tough as one of the dyke-eels he had so often speared as a lad, that got out of a train at the smart new station near Marshton that Christmas-time. Denzil felt perfectly bewildered by the many changes that had taken place in the last four years. Two railways ran over the part where only treacherous swamps had been ; where the wild-duck had had its home and the snipe their boggy springs, good streets with rows of houses had already been

made. The whole marsh had been drained and become solid ground. The tide no longer flooded the lower part of Marshton; all was changed save the upper portion of the old place, but alterations were imminent even there. After all, it was a better system that would replace the old, and if new blood was coming into the place—in every sense of that expression, for the fisher folk were actually becoming reconciled to marriages between their lasses and the men they regarded as doubtful "furriners"—so much the better for Marshton.

Scoot and Winder gazed in astonishment at the man who presented himself in their fishing quarter on that Christmas eve. "An' to think as we niver thought as ye'd live to be a man! our bit of a 'Reed-bird,' as we called ye," said Winder.

They themselves had developed into a pair of fine healthy bronzed fishermen, as stoutly built as any that ever managed a boat or drew a line.

"Ef 'twaunt fur thet laugh, an' the look in his eyes that we knows so well, we couldn't never believe as 'twas yourself," said Scoot.

"And old Nance?" asked Den, after a little—"is she still alive?"

"Yes, poor old creatur, in spite of all the scandalous tricks as we've played her. Let's go an' hev a look at her afore we settles down fur the evenin'."

In answer to the young men's rap at her door, it was opened by old Nance herself.

"Cum in, my lads, cum in," said she. "'Tis lonesome here on a Christmas eve; it's good on ye to cum. I'm jest tired with thinkin' over bygone times; cum in. But, mussy on us, I didn't see as ye'd a stranger with ye!" she added, when the three stood in the firelight of her little room.

"All right, mother, 'tis only a friend, an' we shan't stop long; we've jest brought ye a little parcel to remind ye what time 'tis," said Winder.

"Bless yer kind hearts, 'tis real good on ye; an' I wunt keep ye now, as ye've a stranger with ye: 'tis easy to see as he don't belong to our folks," remarked the old woman.

"Now don't ye make too sure o' that, Nance," cried Scoot. "Put on yer specs, an' hev a good look at him."

At that Denzil rose from his chair and grasped the old woman's hand.

She turned to Scoot and Winder, and in a tremulous voice said, "This ain't one o' yer old pranks agin, surely; there's somethin' o' Denzil about him. An' yit——"

"Nancy, I am Denzil," said the young man.

Poor old Nance! she had been greatly attached to the "boy" in her own way, and she was strangely moved as she looked at him earnestly through her

glasses. "Ye are yer father's son, an' no mistake," she said at last; "his very pictur ye've growed tu be. Poor Philip! May ye be more happy an' fortunate in yer life than he ever was. He's dead an' gone now, an' his own didn't du as they should by him; but there—my wishes fur ye this Christmas eve is thet ye may be happier. Ye've got his looks, boy; but ye belongs to us, don't ye niver forgit that."

How the whole of that Christmas eve was spent we need not detail here. Old memories came thick and fast amid the clouds of smoke that curled about the fishermen's weather-beaten faces under the low timbered ceiling. Many a question was put and answered about the old friends who had passed away, and those that remained, and of the changes that were so rapidly taking place all around. They told how some of the marshes had been drained to such an extent that fruit-trees were growing where the reeds had been; and the decoy,—that sacred decoy, the precincts of which had been so respected that never had a shore-shooter been known to fire a gun within half a mile of it—where enormous quantities of wild-fowl had been captured, the pride and boast of the marshlands, as it had been, they said, from the times of the great Queen Elizabeth, —was no longer in existence; a young and thriving fruit orchard stood now in its place.

The swamp, too, where the Lord of Shoreland's ghostly troop came to fetch their corpse-lights from, had been thoroughly drained; and, in fact, the railway now passed right through it. And that part of the town where Den had been used to see the grass growing among the stones of the pavement, had become a busy and thriving place of business.

"'Tis a strange thing," said one of his old friends, "that folks could be so perverse and narrow-minded ez tu find fault with men fur marryin' tu please themselves; but they too are at rest now, boy, an' we're glad tu see ye so well an' hearty."

"That's all past and gone," said Den.

"Yes; an' ye'll marry as he did, an' please yerself," said one of the old crones, with a sharp look at the young man.

The fisher lasses showed him as much kindness as ever; but they seemed, after many discussions amongst themselves on the subject, to come to the conclusion that Den was not likely to choose a wife from their midst. He liked a little fun with them, as he had always done, and as every well-conditioned young man will, but his natural reserve and his quiet manner kept them somewhat at a distance.

It seemed to him that the fisher folk had already begun to change, like their surroundings. They were losing much of their peculiar dialect, and

although the older members of the community still clung to their fanatical opinions and weird superstitions, yet they had to give way outwardly to the new order of things. Four short years had worked marvels, Den thought. When his friends told him that the large old-fashioned inn at Standbeck, where as a boy he had gone to gaze at the golden eagles, had been converted into a big draper's establishment which was the centre of a busy street, he shook his head and said nothing. It was a real shock to his sensibilities. "And what about the old flounder-spearing and crab-catching place in the creek?" he asked Scoot.

"That's a thing of the past, Den," his friend replied, mournfully; "the sheep is feeding where the crabs shuffled along."

"A good thing too," said Winder; "the channel has been altered to suit vessels with a greater draught of water. The wild-fowl too has deserted the flats; ef ye want a day's shootin', ye'll hev to go close to the open sea for it. The noise of them engines snortin' along has driven 'em clean away."

They told him that the consternation of the old folks when they heard of the proposed line of railway knew no bounds. The word "navvy" was a perfect bugbear to them; they imagined him a brute who would stick at nothing. In their horror

of him they actually sold off all the produce of their gardens at a low rate, so that there might be nothing there to tempt the invader, when his work of destruction began. Afterwards, to their regret, they found they could have sold it to these very men at a high price, and instead of their turning out desperadoes, as they had expected, the strangers proved to be mostly civil, law-abiding men. To such a length had they carried their animosity at first, that some of the men who were at work in a large brick-field barred the progress of a number of the navvies employed on the line, who were on their way to a fair that was being held near. Their opposition was so strong that the navvies actually had to go back the same way they came. Their idea of Kentish civilisation, not to say hospitality, must have been a poor one, after the treatment they received. And yet the construction of that railway was a great boon to both fishers and farmers. All their produce hitherto had gone by very slow modes of conveyance on land and water to London; and the delivery was very uncertain—which, where fruit and fish were concerned, caused much loss. But still it was long before even the farmers living on the edge of the flats, close to the line, took full advantage of the railway: they shook their slow old heads, and said "the old times wus best, an' the old ways too;

they couldn't abide so much fuss an' noise about everythin'."

"Now don't ye pledge yerself fur this evening anywheres," said Scoot to Denzil on Christmas morning. "We shel be off fur the fishin' soon, an' we wants ye to-night, Den."

After tea a rap came at the door of his mother's kinsfolk, with whom he was staying. It was an invitation to follow the messenger to a certain house in the long main street.

"'Tis all right, boy," said his host; "we shel be followin' ye by-and-by."

When he had entered the large room to which his companion led him, Den found himself surrounded by all those of his old friends whom death had spared. Even the aged village crones were there, and old Nance amongst them. In the centre of the room was hung a mighty bunch of misletoe, specially saved, he was told, from the orchard of the Portreeve for this occasion. As poor old Nance hobbled up across the room to speak to him, Den very gently drew her under the mystic plant and embraced her in truly orthodox fashion. Afterwards, when her tongue had been duly loosened with hot and nourishing port negus, she was heard remarking to another old body—

"Drat him! who'd ever ha' thought as he'd ha' done it; but there, he's as full o' life an' fun tu-

night as eny kitten, an' I'm as glad as iver I can be tu see him once more."

The fun grew fast, and all were happy, the young folks under the misletoe, the older ones in a snug side-room, where they enjoyed themselves in their own fashion. They did not part till daylight, and to Den it was a pleasant welcome back to the flats.

In the morning his kinsman Larry left a message, in Denzil's absence, to the effect that he was wishing to see him. The memory of painful passages between his own father and Larry's had kept him from presenting himself at the big house before, although his elder relative had passed away during his absence.

There was silence at first between the friends as they grasped each other's hands—then Larry said, "'Tis you and no mistake, Den; but how altered for the better! I let the others have you last night, but now you and I don't part again so easily. There have been changes, but my place is just as it was; I will have nothing altered. My sister Agnes is dead too, and I am left alone, the last of our kin. When I go, there will be no one to take the old place."

Some sad memories crowded in on Denzil, and he did not speak.

"Ah, your eyes are wandering to the picture-gallery on the old stairs; there will be no rest

till you have looked at your father's work there. The window is just as he fixed it, and all his drawings; your paintings are in my own room, every scrap that ever you put brush or pencil to."

Then the pair went into the stained-glass workshop. "There are the snipe and the mallard; your father hung them on that very nail himself, Den: one of the workmen happened to knock them down once, and he got it pretty hotly from my father, I can tell you. The old place gives me a dreary lonesome feeling at times; but I must get over it somehow, for I shall bring no one home to it. Sit down, Den, let us make ourselves as comfortable as we can," he added, with a more cheery air; "you and I are the last of them here, but we will be merry to-night once more."

Soon they fell to talking of the wild-fowl, both of them being lovers of the creatures, and Larry gave a minute description of the distress and terror they were in when the first steps were taken for the draining of the marshes. The poor birds were like crazed things, he said, when they found their haunts invaded. The gulls flapped and cackled over the site of their favourite shallow bathing-pools, now drained dry. They would dip down there and settle, and then spring up with hoarse cries, only to settle again, and querulously lament together over the disastrous changes.

And when the order was given to clear the reed-beds, in order to find out the capability of the bottoms for the proposed line of railroad, what a wealth of bird-life it proved had been hidden there, in the shape of "hen-footed things," as they called the waders. It was a matter of great surprise to all when they learned that the beautiful reed-pheasant, or bearded tit, had been their close neighbour, and had bred there unsuspected by any. Larry showed Den some specimens of exceedingly rare birds on that coast, which he had procured at the same time. The poor creatures, when they found their homes were destroyed, wandered up and down along the edges of the lagoons in a disconsolate, stupid fashion, an easy prey to any who cared to shoot them, until the instinct of self-preservation warned them to quit, lest they should be exterminated.

As to the herons, their motions and actions were grotesque in the extreme, for their favourite eel-catching ground had been converted into a broad channel of thick mud, to them of unknown depth. Worse still, men in numbers were in the marshes, a host of them. The "lookers" they were accustomed to; but these were creatures of an unknown species. The poor herons found no rest, day nor night, with all the strange sights and sounds that were about on all sides. The invaders had guns

with them too, and they shot all the wild-fowl they could. As to the hares, they made a clean bolt of it, away to the upland pastures, where they remained; for the new-comers had small greyhounds as well as guns. These dogs were not half the size of the graziers' long-dogs, which were nearly as large as deer-hounds; but they caught the hares quickly, and killed them easily.

And at night, when the fowl that flew over the flats intending to feed, found their old feeding-places dry, they called, screamed, and whistled all the night long, flying distractedly hither and thither, only leaving at daybreak. In the daytime they forsook the immediate neighbourhood where the line was in course of construction for a locality miles distant; but for a long time they returned at night, to cry and wail over their old haunts. When the track reached the duck decoy, the ducks left the spot never to return. The owner destroyed it and converted its site into a fruit orchard. When the line was completed and the telegraph posts and wires fixed, the fowl used to dash against the wires in their flight; and more were killed in that way during one night than the shore-shooters had ever killed in a month. The telegraph wires, also, showed that even they had not suspected the whole of the different species that had been in the habit of visiting them. The birds, being

swift flyers, were many of them cut in two. In time, taught by experience, they learned to rise higher in their flight, so as to clear the wires. Then the trains began to run, and dire was their fright and confusion in face of those rushing monsters. They got used to them, however, after a time, and would dabble and guzzle in the drains close to the track as the trains rushed by.

As to the quaking bog, where the bridge crossed it, and its supposed hidden tragedy of the past, the railway engineers had exorcised the spirits there for ever. When they tried the spot for foundations for the railway track, it was found that the dreaded part was only a firm crust of earth and timber, all rotted and bound together. How long it had been in that condition none could say, but it was a solid mass which literally floated on a bog. The instinct of the horses told them of the danger as it shook beneath them. Had the crust broken through, they and their riders or drivers would have been smothered in that deep bog.

"The fowl have nearly left this part now, though, Denzil," continued Larry very sadly; "a few come, and will come because of the tidal water; but we shall never again see the sights you and I have seen together. And now, Den, I want you to do something for me."

"Anything in my power, Larry. You have only to speak the word."

"Then come into the old workshop. You see the ceiling has been newly whitened; 'twas fresh done as soon as I heard you were coming. I want you to draw me something in the middle of that ceiling."

"No time like the present," said Den, and taking from a pocket the crayon-case that accompanied him everywhere, to his friend's delight he placed on the whitened surface overhead a wounded heron, life size, wing-tipped, trying to rise from the ground.

"Is there anything more you would like, Larry?" he asked.

Without a word his friend pointed to a panel over the chimney-place. There Denzil drew for him a bullfinch picking at some fruit.

When Larry's hair had turned grey, years later, Den heard that the master's hand had drawn a circle round those birds, and no one had ever been allowed to whiten or paint near them except himself. The old-fashioned shutters did not reach the top of the windows by a good bit, and at night, when the shop was shut, but was lit up within, it was the master's delight to listen to the remarks passed on his decorated ceiling by those who paused outside to look at the heron and the bull-

finch. One night the fisher lasses actually marched up in a body "to see what Den had drawn for Larry." In the young master's eyes all drawings of his two kinsmen were priceless.

"The mummers and the carol-singers have done their rounds, Den," said Larry next morning; "but the maskers will be in full force this week, and we can have some fun. I have two outfits, one that of Smuggler Bill, and the other that of a coast-guardsman. We are the same height and figure, so they will just do for the pair of us."

It was the custom of the maskers to visit all the out-of-the-way hamlets on the edge of the flats for miles round, and these visits were much appreciated and eagerly looked for by the inhabitants, unsophisticated as they were. Any individuals who might have rendered themselves obnoxious in any way to the general community were apt to be reminded of it at that time in a harmless yet telling way. Scoot and Winder, of course, always figured greatly on these occasions; and this particular Christmas-time Scoot was got up as "Old Bogey," or his Satanic Majesty, with all the details carried out according to the universally accepted idea of that personage among the dwellers on the flats. There he was, shaggy skin, horns, hoofs, and tail complete, not forgetting his fire-fork. A grim figure he made.

Winder rigged himself out as a ranter preacher of the least attractive description. His character was intended to be from the life, and it was assumed for private purposes of retribution, and as an expression of his contempt for a certain preacher in the neighbourhood. The mother of the young woman whom Winder was "coortin" belonged to what he and his friends termed that "ranter's groanin' and preachin' shop." When this "minister" called in, as he frequently did, to make a pastoral visit, "just to make spiritual things clear to the old lady," the daughter could not conceal her intense dislike and aversion to him from her sweetheart. She said he only came after the ague medicine that her mother kept in a special bottle for his benefit, and which he found exceedingly grateful and comforting, with just a dash of hot water and a little sugar.

The preacher had an equally strong aversion to Winder, and during his very prolonged pastoral calls he would hold forth fiercely against backsliders in particular, whilst he groaned over the vanity of this world in general, sipping the while at his stiff mixture of Hollands and water.

At last Winder's true-hearted lass could stand it no longer, and one evening when they were expecting the preacher to call, she emptied the bottle of spirits and refilled it with rain-water. I give the

story exactly as it happened. Jenny was a very truthful girl, and not given to exaggerations. After the old humbug had greeted mother and daughter, in his own unctuous fashion, he sat down, and the usual bottle was soon placed before him, with an invitation to help himself. Words failed Jenny afterwards, when she tried to describe the change that came over the preacher's long grim visage after the first mouthful. He just looked up in the girl's face, which was full of ill-suppressed mirth, and, without a word of remonstrance, caught up his drain-pipe hat and rushed from the house. It was this "shepherd of a bleating flock," as Den called him, whom Winder personated among the maskers. All recognised the burlesque, and enjoyed it to the full. To make the whole more real, he had actually got possession of one of the man's own hats, in some way only known to Jenny and himself.

The maskers' visits were paid to the outlying districts in the daytime, and the men were hospitably entertained by the farmers. With one or two exceptions, all these places were reached through narrow lanes, with high banks or hedges on either side. As they gathered for the first march-out, it was a motley sight; they walked in pairs always strongly contrasted. On this special occasion Den was "Smuggler Bill"; he had a small spirit-keg

slung at his side, and a brace of pistols stuck in his belt. Beside him was Larry, gaily chatting as a custom-house officer. Scoot, as the author of evil, appeared to be making naughty speeches to that chosen vessel, Winder, who turned his eyes up and grasped a large bundle of tracts tightly, whilst he listened to his grim mate. It was one of the rules of the society of maskers that all shoes or boots must be muffled, and this was done by drawing a worsted stocking over the foot; so that all moved about noiselessly like phantoms. They went and came to the farmsteads in perfect silence, but once seated round the hospitable board, all tongues were loosened and wagged freely. Will it be credited, too, that in spite of the terror that the appearance of some of the men might have been supposed to inspire, the farmers' daughters and maids received, and even returned, kisses under small sprays of misletoe which the crew took care to carry in their belts as well as pistols? Under the misletoe, as well as round the May-pole in the good old times, the maids are everywhere wont "to quarrel with the men, and bid them take their kisses back, and give them their own again."

As our friends were marching from one hamlet to another, the irrepressible spirit of mischief broke out in Scoot, who happened to notice through the hedge a solitary farmer's man spreading manure.

He nudged Winder, who at once threw off all clerical reserve, and became himself again; rubbing his hands, and tipping his tall black hat jauntily on one side of his head. He was ready for the fun now. The troop noted the movements of the pair, and stood in silence by the hedge to see what would follow. As the labourer in the course of his job neared the hedge, Scoot, whilst the man's back was turned, quietly crept through and set to work forking the manure with his own implement quite close to him. The poor fellow looked round, gave one terrified gaze, yelled out something, and, throwing down his spud, ran for his life. The way the mud flew off his heavy shoes as he sped along was a sight not easily forgotten. The joke took greater effect than was ever dreamed of by the perpetrator. We will only tell that a very handsome collection was afterwards made by the crew, and the sum carried to the poor fellow next day with an ample apology for the fright he had received. And after that his Satanic Majesty never figured in the marshland frolics again.

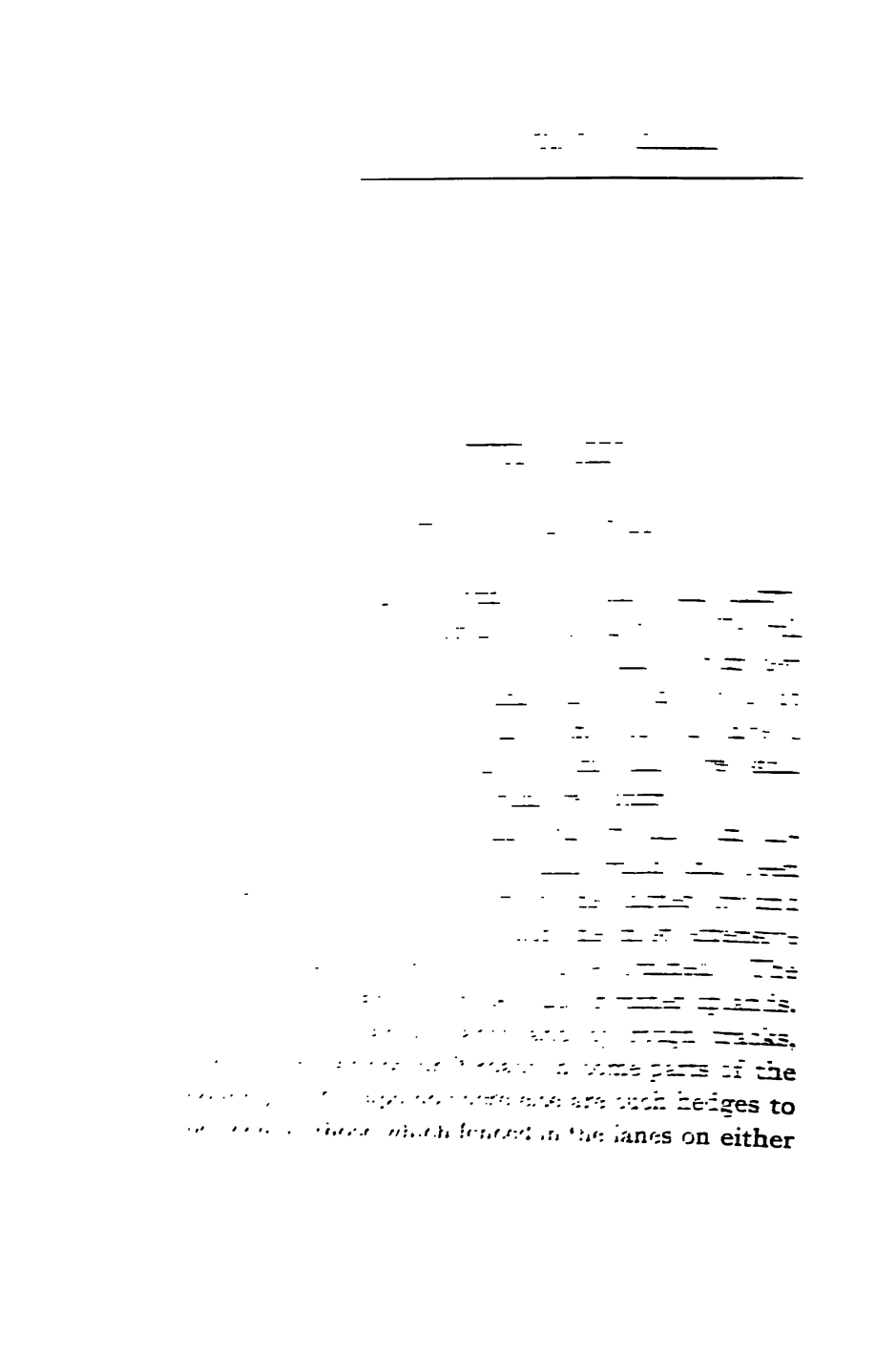
The same evening, on getting back to Marshton, the maskers, at Winder's request, drew up in front of the ranting preacher's house, and, with one of the unfortunate man's own hats stuck on the back of his head, Winder led the "Jim Crow" chorus,

which was vociferously sung by the whole party. That settled the preacher.

One of those narrow lanes had the reputation for curing gout. If any one complained of suffering in that way, he would be jokingly bidden to walk up Pig-cart lane. The idea had originated in an experience of one of the Portreeve's workman, a poor fellow who was recovering from an acute attack of gout in his feet, and was just able to hobble to work with the aid of a stick. Pig-cart lane was the narrowest of all the lanes; if a cart was coming down or up it, any one, on foot even, had to climb up one of its banks so as to let the vehicle pass. The poor gouty man had to go to the farm at the end of the lane once, to do a job in the winter-time early in the morning, when it was very dark there between the high banks. Unknown to the workman, a butcher had started the same morning to fetch a fat pig from the farm. The huge pigs of the marshes at that time were not like the dainty little porkers folks affect nowadays. It was very cold weather, the pig had been got into the cart—no easy job—and the strong netting was fixed over him. Then the butcher returned to the kitchen door, just to have some hot elderberry wine, with a dash of something stronger in it; when, made restless possibly by the complaining grunts of the unhappy pig, the horse snapped the slight fastening with which he had

been tied up, and away he bolted right down the narrow lane. As poor gouty Jimmy trudged up slowly with his stick, he heard a strange combination of sounds approaching from the other end—the horse's gallop, with the fat pig's lamentations, as he was tossed up and down, and banged from side to side of the noisy cart in most cruel fashion. Jimmy's hair stood on end at the unearthly sounds proceeding from the darkness in front, and coming nearer every moment. There was the horse's snort, and the beat of hoofs, coming thud, thud, ever louder. He was too startled to distinguish the different sounds; the yells and shrieks of the pig seemed uppermost. When the unseen terror was close on him, with a wild cry for mercy Jimmy threw down his stick and scrambled up the bank with all the agility of a monkey. The terror rushed past, and from the top the man heard the groaning and wailing pass away in the distance.

An hour later a wild figure dashed into the workshop, saying that a part of hell had broke loose and passed him on the road. As he pranced round in his excitement, his fellow-workmen noticed that his gout had quite left him. And, indeed, from that time, he never felt another twinge of it. For many a day afterwards Jimmy got twitted about his gouty feet. He took it very good-humouredly, and often told how Pig-cart lane had cured him most effectually.



side. They were formed of huge blackthorns, whitethorn, crab and wild-plum trees, bullaces. Impenetrable they were both to man and beast—that is anything in the way of farm stock. Here and there you would distinguish the heavily thatched roof of some lonely farmstead showing through the ash-trees by which it was surrounded, and beyond them the track that led for a long distance to the uplands looking over the marshes. Past great open fields it went, commanding a view seawards. From them the flash and report could be seen and heard from the majestic three-decker of a hundred and twenty guns, that lay ten miles away; it was the guard-ship lying off the dockyard.

When the snow drifted over those wide stretches of fields, which were only divided in places by belts of marshland that could not at that time be brought under cultivation, it would have been madness to attempt to cross them; the wind blew in a perfect hurricane at times direct from the sea, tearing the snow up in vast winding-sheets, wherewith it smothered all they drifted on. Denzil had seen those hedges on the field-side with only the top-most twigs of the boughs showing; and with these natural bulwarks to protect the narrow track, the snow still lay there waist-deep in severe winters. Some of the lonely cottages would then be covered up to their chimneys. Then was the time to prove

of what stuff the marshland dwellers were made. They gathered in relief parties from all quarters and dug out the buried homes. Each farmer possessed a snow-plough, and the merry jingle of the bells that were carried about the necks of the powerful horses bore in advance glad tidings of help to those cottagers who were prisoners beneath the snowdrifts. These were the great fields over which the tons of fresh fish were spread, to which the gulls came. In harvest-time they showed one long stretch of golden corn; but in winter their appearance was dreary, only enlivened by the plovers, gulls, hooded crows, and magpies that flocked to them. Twice during the year the gulls came there — when the fish were placed in heaps, and then again when the fields were ploughed. To a lover of bird-life it was a pretty sight to see those gulls following the ploughs, picking up the worms and insects that the ploughshares turned up. Their pure white and grey plumage was brought out in fine relief against the warmly toned rich brown furrows. They knew no shyness, but flapped round and about the men and their teams most unconcernedly, never being molested in any way. To shoot a gull in ploughing-time would have been considered a most wanton and heartless piece of cruelty,—an ill return for the inestimable benefit the birds conferred in clean-

ing the soil from the dreaded wire-worm and other things that never escaped those sharp eyes. Woe betide the mice that were turned up, ousted from their homes by the unsparing plough. For a moment or two their long tails could be seen flicking up and down as their owners make tracks; but only for that brief space, the next view of them would be the tips merely showing outside the gulls' beaks. Plump mice are a dainty to them.

In those days the farm-labourer, or farmer's man, was a very different being to the type mostly known at the present time. Master and man understood one another; it was very seldom that a man changed his master, or a master his man.[1] They could do things in those days that a farm-servant

[1] As I write this an old servant of my own father's—Mr Thomas Pinder—comes before my mind's eye. As far as I remember, he had never served any but my father up to the date of his death. The man was often a great trial, as he was negligent at times, though otherwise very faithful. On several occasions this had caused dismissal to be given him; but in consideration of his personal devotion this had been as often withdrawn, and John felt very secure of his place. One day, however, he had so aggravated my father that he told him he must leave, and this time there would be no repeal, so he must look out for other employment at once.

John felt from the master's manner that this was final, and he turned away in a half-stunned fashion. After going a few steps, however, he suddenly turned round, and, facing my father, said in a determined tone of voice, "If thee doesna know when thee's gotten a good servant, I know when I's gotten a good measter, an' I shanna go!" The master

cannot do now; for they were rustic mechanics, able and willing to turn their hands to anything connected with a farm and its surroundings. More than this, they knew all about the creatures that were round about them, and if they said such a bird did good on the land, or the reverse, you might depend on it that it was so; for they saw and noted the ways of the birds all the year round.

One bitter winter Denzil had seen there a falcon flight,—it was a wild falcon,—a sight which he did not soon forget. Nothing intercepted the view over those large fields; the falcon was hungry, and he set to work in the most determined manner. After all his pounces he lost his quarry. Falcons do not capture all the birds they go for.

After the outlying farms were all passed, the track led to the bare uplands. Bare, at least, except for the few scattered blackthorns and trailing branches that, with an occasional furze bush, were the only things that dragged out an existence on those barren lands. Not a vestige of bracken or any other fern could be found there. Belts of wood and high hedges hindered the view as you made your way up to the top of the hill, but when once you had

was overcome; he laughed, and John went back to his work. He sorrowed much when the master was called up higher, and he had to serve another.

reached its crest, a sight not easily forgotten burst on your view.

In the distance lay the greater portion of the marshes; opposite to these was the Essex shore. It was a splendid prospect in the clear crisp air of winter; for, the trees being leafless, you could see all the sequestered homes and farmsteads to which those narrow drift-roads and lanes led for miles round. Besides these, you saw the many large gardens in the hollows, and the poles standing up, looking from this distance like rows of masts. Orchards and fruit-gardens too, with the quaint farm-houses to which they belonged, were there, and the buildings where the hops were dried, locally termed "hop-oasts," topped by curious cowls that look like inverted cones with a quarter cut out of them. Then you saw the river Thames and the Medway at their meeting place with the tide. These rivers, which were called by their proper names in the days when Denzil wandered [illegible] With the natives [illegible] London river [illegible] calling them [illegible]

believe it was, and the progressive draining of the flats,—his correspondent told him that the greatest changes had taken place "at the mouth of the London and Chatham rivers."

From the crest of the Nor'ard hills the water was in some places only two or three miles away, according to the way the land lay; in some places it was much nearer. If you looked seawards, there was the Isle of Sheppy, with the man-of-war ships at anchor, and then the open sea. Inland you had orchard after orchard, great fruit-gardens and fields under the plough. A beautiful sight at any time; but when the fruit-trees were in full blossom in those grand old Kent orchards, the view from the top of the Nor'ard hills was simply glorious.

We left our friends about to start on their walk to the uplands.

"Let us take the lower road and come over the Nor'ard hills on our way home," said Larry.

Starting from the town, they made at once for Lower Halston, at that time a dreary and secluded spot. By tracks known to themselves they made their way through the belt of woods that lined the edges of the flats, which afforded shelter to the hop-gardens and orchards. Here their guns would have been useless that day, for the alterations had driven the fowl over to the Essex shore. The few birds that were scattered over the place would not

have been worth the notice of men accustomed to the hosts that had once covered their flats. As they passed from the woods on to the marsh, lines on lines of drain-pipes met their eye at intervals, looking like thin red lines drawn over the flats, and they saw the dark marsh mould thrown up in long ridges. Those drain-pipes, harmless as they seemed, were destined to do what all the combined efforts of generations of shooters had never done, in the way of driving the fowl from the flats.

Passing again from the marsh to the woods, they came across one of these old shooters, a man who, until then, had lived by his fishing and shooting. The poor old boy said he reckoned it was nearly time he came to anchor, these changes would surely kill him. As it was, he said, his living was gone, so it did not matter how soon they put him under ground. The folks were all mourning the draining of the marshes; and they talked together sadly of the good times that would never come back to them again, as they rubbed and polished their dear duck-guns, to place them on one side most religiously, where they would always be cared for as precious heirlooms. From father to son these time-honoured old fowling-pieces had descended.

"A change has cum, past all reckonin'," they declared mournfully, "an' these new ways an' new-

fangled schemes is all clear runnin' agin Pruvidence; fur the ma'shes an' the fowl allus has bin here since the mem'ry o' martal man, an' 'tis a most desprit an' wicked thing fur tu do away with 'em like this."

Poor old chap! He said, too, that one of his sons had told him that strange tales were going about of alterations on the Essex shore, with all their harbours for the hosts of fowl that had always sheltered there. Some of those flats also were going to be drained. The old boy mourned on, and remarked at parting that "if such crazy goin's on continued, the whole country wud soon be ruinated." So much for the appreciation in which the drainage of their much-loved but pestilent flats was held by the older part of the community.

"Some of the old churches are likely to be done up, I am told," remarked Larry—"in other words, just desecrated and spoiled; relics of the past ruined for ever." And so it was; those splendid brasses Denzil had almost worshipped as a boy, with the effigies of lords and ladies, and gallant knights so beautifully chased on the metal, over which the whole congregation walked most piously, are no more to be found. Where, too, are the grotesquely carved stalls? Gone, none can tell you where.

When Larry and Den drew near the Nor'ard hills on their homeward way, dusk was drawing

nigh, the flight-time of the fowl. As these rushed from the Essex shore to the flats remaining on the Kentish side—for the fowl worked to and fro—they no longer flashed over the crest of the hills in silence as they had been wont to do in times past; but, as our friends listened to them swiftly passing over, they heard hoarse calls and querulous pipings —laments, Denzil said, for their loved haunts that were being taken from them.

On reaching home the two found that permission had arrived for them to shoot over about 500 acres of rough shooting in the island; or, properly speaking, in that part of the Isle of Sheppy that lay nearest to the town, which was about eight miles distant. As the railway then ran direct to Sheerness, Larry proposed that they should go by train there, and then walk from the railway station across country to their shooting-ground. Den could then see for himself all the alterations in the scenes of his old wanderings.

The morning was cold and bright, all that could be desired; but few fowl indeed were to be seen as they passed along, with the exception of a few straggling gulls. After getting out of the train, Den stood still for a while in amazement. Could this be the place where the broken jetty stood, looking always ready to be washed away? And a solid landing-place for the steamers had taken the

place of the old sea-wall that was heavily timbered at the sides with huge driven piles covered with sea-weed tangle, where the great winkles hung thick as blackberries on a bramble bush; where the great eels had twisted about, visible at low water, and the crabs scuttled along in search of their food. As Denzil stood there, memory brought back the sight of a dead face turned up towards his own, that of a companion of his boyhood, whose body had been found in that gruesome spot, washed in there by the tide; and a change passed over his own face that was noted by Larry.

"I know what's in your mind, Den—I see it too. But, there, come on; the old place used to be thriving enough, you know, in my grandfather's days, and it has woke up again like a giant refreshed. Look down the street where we used to see the grass growing amongst the stones. If that is not a change for the better I've no more to say."

They passed through the dockyard town, and made for the minster church a few miles distant. It was in that direction that their shooting lay, in the very heart of the marsh. There few alterations had as yet taken place; the large old water-butts still stood round the grey old church, their solid lids securely fastened down with padlocks as of old: rain-water had been considered a precious article by the few inhabitants of the hamlet near.

From these large receptacles water had, in dry seasons, been doled out carefully for drinking purposes. The natives did not care to use the water of the lagoons on the flats for washing even. It was impregnated with foul matter from the reeking swamps.

"Shoreland's horse's head still keeps his place on the old tower," observed Larry, pointing to the gilded figure that acted as weather-cock.

Close to this spot it was, according to our local traditions, told by the old crones, as well as recorded in the Ingoldsby legend, that the fatal order was given by the Lord of Shorelands—Shurland —*to bring him his boots*. From this, the highest portion of the Isle of Sheppy, they made their way down to the low ground. Before they had proceeded a mile, that red line showed itself again; the draining had begun even here.

"The guns might as well have been left at home," said Larry, with a rueful look.

"We can have a good walk over the old ground, anyway," said Denzil. As they tramped over the marsh the hares rushed away at their approach unmolested. It was always an understood thing that permission to shoot the fowl did not include these animals.

There were, after all, plenty of fowl, but they were high up and out of reach. From the arm

at the sea that ran close by, could be heard the report of duck-guns from the vessels sailing there: all boats carried a gun, and when a bird dropped, it was the skiff to pick it up. Many of these boats in the course of a trip of twenty miles or more, sailing close inshore, would get enough fowl to reward their crew: for, as the birds were disturbed on the flats, they made at once for the sea.

At times, it is true, no fowl were shot either from the shore or from the boats, because some days they will not rest anywhere, but rush from the Kent side to the Essex shore and back again, all the time: not in hosts as at their flight-time, but in trips of ten, thirty, or forty together, as the case may be. This means mixed fowl, including ducks and the hen-footed things, the heron, and others, down to the dunlin or oxbird.

Although the marsh where our two friends had leave to shoot was not itself under process of drainage, the surrounding grazing-grounds were; and as gun licences were then not even dreamed of, every man in each company of a dozen drainers—some of the shore-shooters even had been obliged to turn to that work as a means of living—carried a gun, or rather had one close at hand, to use as the chance offered. Denzil saw the stock part of some of these peeping outside the rough jackets

that had been laid down on the dry flags, the long barrels being concealed inside the drain-pipes.

"Many turns like this would give a fellow the blues," said Larry, as they fired off their loads in the air before being ferried over the creek. "With all this draining we may just hang up the guns as fireside ornaments."

And so it was; for as the railroads gave facility for placing product in the London markets and elsewhere, cement-works, wharves, and ship-yards appeared along the water-side, as though by magic it seemed to the slow thinking and acting graziers, and old marsh dwellers; and in the spots where at one time the silence had been broken only by the cry of the wild-fowl, rang out the clink and hum of machinery and the clang of hammers, the fowl having flitted for good.

CHAPTER XXIII.

IN CONCLUSION.

ALL pleasant things come to an end, however—perhaps it is owing to this fact that they seem so very pleasant to us, often; and Den had to turn his back on fun and frolic and the joys of renewed friendships, and to return to his work among Surrey hills and woods. "Good-bye, Den, prosperity go with you!" said Larry, as the pair, so strongly united both by the ties of relationship and their mutual love of nature, grasped each other's hands. "Come back soon; that heron will remain where it is as long as we live, but I need no reminder of you, old fellow. When you come next, bring your wife with you; you are not the sort to go through life long alone."

It was, as Larry predicted, not long before Denzil married, and his choice proved a very happy one. He married, as his father did before him,

"to please himself," and his wife was one who could not only understand and sympathise with him in his tastes, but who was as fond of the creatures as he was himself. When he saw her surrounded by the wild things he brought home with him, the reserved, self-contained lines of his face would relax and soften, and he looked, what he called himself, "well content." To her, he always said, he owed the development of the better part of his nature; she was his best friend as well as his wife. To her alone he fully unbent, and he gave her his perfect confidence. She was well worthy of it, too, as all his friends knew.

After the day's toil, with pen and pencil, he continued the studies of his youth; and all his leisure time was devoted to one purpose—namely, the endeavour to know and understand the creatures that our Father above has created to share His beautiful world with ourselves.

THE END.

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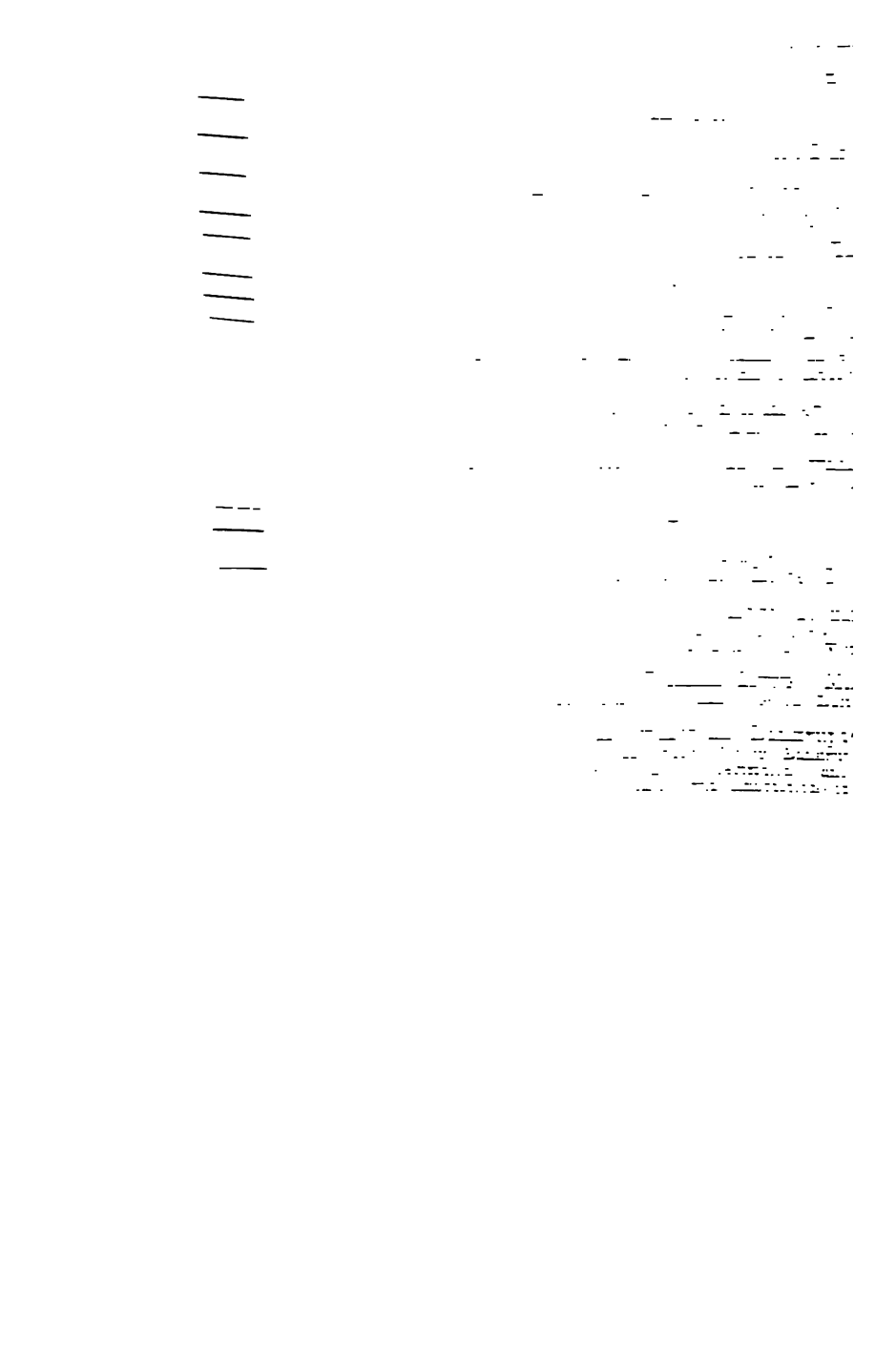
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